

**ROPE'S
END
ROGUE'S
END**

**E·C·R
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WULFSTANE MANOR, a rambling old country house with many unused rooms, winding staircases and a maze of cellars, had been bequeathed to Veronica Mallowood and her brother Martin. The last time the large family of Mallowoods had all foregathered under the ancestral roof was on the occasion of their father's funeral, and there had been one of those unholy rows which are infrequently follow the reading of a will. That was some years ago, and as Veronica found it increasingly difficult to go on paying for the upkeep of Wulfstane she summoned another family conference—a conference in which Death took a hand. *Rope's End—Rogue's End* is, of course, an Inspector Macdonald case, in which that popular detective plays a brilliant part. It is a first rate story with an enthralling denouement.

ROPE'S END, ROGUE'S END

by
E.C.R. LORAC

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All characters in this novel are fictitious. If the name of any living person has been used, it has been used inadvertently and no reference to such person is intended.

CHAPTER ONE

THE October sunlight was streaming across the hall at Wulfstane Manor, drawing tawny lights from the dark oak panelling and the worn floor, gleaming on brass and copper and pewter, enriching the golden beech leaves which stood in ancient earthenware pots. The same mellow radiance dealt less kindly with worn rugs and sagging chairs: in its shafts quivered myriad dust motes, and its vividness shamed the dull fire, whose logs smouldered sulkily in the vast open hearth.

Paul Mallowood stood with his back to the open doors and drew a deep breath as he stared at the familiar place. The smell was the same as ever: a fragrance compounded of wood smoke, of old leather and older timber, of tobacco, and the subtle tang of chrysanthemums. Radiance and dust: beauty of ancient craftsmanship marred by lack of care and skill: noble proportion and slovenly treatment. Paul swore beneath his breath. He loved the place so dearly. In his cold, able, clear-thinking mind there was just the one weakness, the one sentimental frailty, and that was his passion for the house in which he had been born and reared. There were many finer specimens of the English Manor House than Wulfstane – and within his power to acquire – but the only place he wanted was Wulfstane, and that he could not have.

As he stood there, gazing with distaste at the tokens of neglect which marred a lovely house, a sudden flash of awareness came across his mind. He seemed to be standing for ever at the doorway of something he desired intensely and which just eluded his grasp, and that object of his desire was marred by dust and neglect...

"I'll tell Higgins, sir, but I'm not sure if he knows about cars like that there."

Paul Mallowood choked down a snort of disgust. It was the parlourmaid who had spoken to him, startling him out of an unaccustomed reverie. He

eyed her with disfavour. There had always been a manservant to open the door at Wulfstane – and now this clumsy ill-spoken country wench. Behind him, gleaming in the sunlight outside, his two-seater Rolls was drawn up. He had told the maid to get the chauffeur to put it away in the garage. At least there had always been a man of sorts about the place who did the duties of chauffeur, even though gardening was his main occupation.

“Oh, leave it alone, then. I’ll garage it myself later,” he said curtly, and advanced into the hall, pulling off his driving gloves, and then threw them down on an ancient bridal chest, whose superb oak lid had been marred by a cigarette end which had charred the edge of the moulding.

“Hallo, Paul! How are you?”

The deep voice from behind him caused Mallowood to turn round with a start: until he actually saw her he was uncertain who had spoken, for his sister’s voice was so deep-pitched that it might well have been one of his brothers speaking. Veronica Mallowood had just come down the stairs, and she stood on the last stair, looking down at him with the ironical smile which always exasperated Paul. He stood still in his turn and surveyed her deliberately, aware of the curious antagonism which she always aroused in him.

Veronica was ten years younger than Paul – he had just passed his fiftieth birthday – but whereas his aspect was definitely middle-aged with an inclination to stoutness and a heavily lined face belying his still athletic figure and upright stance, Veronica still looked young. She lacked hardly anything of Paul’s height, and he was a tall man. Broad shouldered, slim hipped, spare, and with a certain magnificence in her bearing, Veronica was a striking figure. Her dark hair was close cropped and brushed well back from her face: a pale unlined skin, fine dark eyes and a clear-cut profile, slightly aquiline, merited the epithet handsome, but just failed to justify that of beautiful. Her lips were beautifully shaped, but just too narrow. They curved now in a smile which was ironical – a thought mocking: amused but not merry. Unreasoningly, Paul felt the same old antagonism towards his sister welling up in his mind again. He never saw her afresh without dislike and an unwilling admiration distracting his mind.

He advanced towards her, saying evenly, “Hallo, Veronica. You look well. How’s the world going?”

She stood on the lowest step and waited for him to come up to her, so that when he raised his face for the brotherly kiss which he never omitted, she was still above him, and bent slightly to touch his cheek with cool close shut lips – a perfunctory salute.

“The world’s going much as usual, thanks. Did you realise that the whole family is here to bid you God-speed before you set out?”

Paul stared. “The whole family? meaning?”

“Just what I say. I usually mean what I say,” she replied, that maddening smile still curving her lips. “Richard turned up the day before yesterday. He flew from Alexandria. Basil came from town yesterday, Richard phoned to him when he arrived. Martin is here as usual – so here we all are. A real family party. It must be years since we were all together under the ancestral roof. Not since father’s funeral, I think.”

Still standing on the lowest stair, Veronica’s smiling lips twitched a little as though in secret amusement, and Paul felt his face growing hot. When the Mallowoods had all come home on the occasion of the old man’s funeral, there had been one of those unholy rows which not infrequently follow the reading of a will. That monstrous will!... Paul still felt fury well up within him when he thought of it; had he followed the primitive instinct within him he would have slapped Veronica’s smiling face as she stood there, deliberately reminding him of his humiliation and hurt.

With unmoved face and a shrug of his shoulders he met her eyes steadily.

“Yes. I suppose that would have been the last occasion. A family party – very nice – once in a way. My room is ready, I take it?”

“Oh, yes. Your room is always ready. We are always prepared to welcome you, Paul. I will come and see if you’ve got everything you want. Those are your suitcases? You always have such handsome luggage!”

Leaving the staircase, she swung across the hall, moving with a long even step, very lightly, her head poised grandly on her long slim neck. She bent and picked up the two heavy leather suitcases and turned with them, holding them with superb ease, one in either hand, while Paul burst out:

“My dear Veronica! Put those things down! What are you dreaming about? Surely Wulfstane is not entirely devoid of servants?”

“Not entirely,” replied Veronica coolly, walking on with a suitcase in either

hand, “but Wulfstane is a big house and visitors involve extra work for the servants, however glad we may be to have visitors – and then, you see, I am much stronger than either of the maids, when it comes to muscular exertion. Oh, if you insist... we needn’t brawl about it, need we?”

Paul had snatched at the suitcases which his sister was carrying, his face flushed again, his eyes bulging with the anger which surged up in him unreasoningly, and she gave herself a little shake as she recovered her stance and walked on to the staircase, saying:

“You are in the west bedroom, as usual. I think you will find that everything is arranged nicely.”

She went upstairs ahead of him, and Paul granted a little as he followed her with the heavy suitcases. He had made up his mind before he came that this time he would avoid any friction with his sister, and be careful to show no irritation, however exasperating she might be, and yet even as he followed her up the staircase his long-standing grievance broke out into words which he regretted as soon as they were uttered:

“I’m not a visitor here in the usual sense of the term, Veronica, so please don’t treat me as one, and remember, if you’d only fall in with my suggestions and let me share the upkeep here, you could have an adequate staff and live with some appearance of dignity.”

“I have no hankerings after an appearance of dignity, and our staff is quite adequate for my own needs and Martin’s, and we are the people really concerned,” she replied lightly, answering in the same flippant easy tone she had used throughout.

At the top of the stairs she turned, and led the way along a shadowy oak-panelled corridor, whose worn floor was uneven to the feet beneath its thin carpet. At the farther end she opened a door, and the mellow afternoon sunlight streamed out into the narrow passage, half blinding Paul Mallowood as he carried the cases.

The room which they entered was long and low panelled, as were most of the rooms in Wulfstane Manor, with mullioned casement windows facing south-west, so that the room was enriched with golden light. A fine Jacobean fourposter stood against one wall, and there were some good oak presses and a long chest beneath the window. Golden and orange chrysanthemums stood

in a pot on the wide window ledge, and a log fire had been lighted in the open grate. It was a beautiful room, unspoiled by any incongruous modern addition, and Paul unconsciously heaved a deep sigh, half of satisfaction, half of exasperation, as he straightened himself after dumping the suitcases. He felt at home here. It was his room, whatever his sister might say.

Veronica, after a glance at the fresh linen hanging on a towel rail, went to adjust the embroidered bedspread, saying:

“I asked Cynthia Lorne to come to dinner this evening. I thought four men and one woman would be a rather unsatisfactory party, so I got Cynthia to come and support me.”

Again Paul felt his face grow hot. Veronica had always had a knack of reading his thoughts, however jealously he guarded them. She went on, her eyes resting amusedly on his hot face:

“Then I knew Basil would enjoy seeing her. She’s not going out much now, of course, but she agreed to come and leaven our family party. Her decree won’t be made absolute for another two months.”

Paul disregarded the last remark, and said curtly, “It will be very pleasant to see her, of course, but you will remember that I said I wanted to talk to you and to Martin before I left England. I came down to-day with that as my main intention. Since it seems that the evening is to be a social affair, perhaps you could spare me an hour after tea for a business talk.”

Veronica turned from the bed, where she had been absent-mindedly smoothing the Queen Anne bedspread, and went to the window, seating her long graceful body on the wide window seat.

“If you want to talk, the present is as good a moment as any, Paul. Cynthia will probably drive over soon after tea. Martin is out just now, but as he and I maybe regarded as having identical interests, you can talk to me as easily as though he were here, too.”

Paul shrugged his shoulders and tried to ignore his own feeling of irritation. To his tidy, conventional mind there was something slipshod and unsatisfactory about having a business talk in a bedroom, with his sister lounging casually on a window seat, and his suitcases dumped in the middle of the floor. Veronica went on, reading his thoughts as she always did, and translating them into a parody.

“Of course the proper setting for a business talk with you is an opulent city office, Paul, with a large desk, wire baskets, filing cabinets, and a hovering secretary to answer the buzzer – but that isn’t my milieu, you see. Such a setting gives you all the advantage, because it reminds me that I am only a poor, muddle-headed woman. This is my setting, my own home, a bit casual in service, a bit inefficient in working, but here I am. I’m listening.”

Paul pulled up a chair and choked down an impatient exclamation as its old carved arms moved loosely under his impatient handling: a museum piece, like the house: also, like the house, in sore need of skilled repair. He sat down, facing his sister, conscious that she half-turned away from him and looked out of the window, her eyes gazing beyond the rose garden to the misty line of the Sussex downs far away against the southern sky.

“If you would give me your full attention for a moment, Veronica, I have a proposition to put to you, which you can consider at your leisure while I am abroad. Forgive me if I have to go over familiar ground at the outset. I want to get the position clear.”

He paused, but Veronica made no comment: with her hands round her knees, leaning back against the side of the window embrasure, her eyes still eluded his. He felt baffled. Veronica always achieved this effect of remoteness when he wanted to make contact with her mind – and she had a very able mind when she chose to concentrate. Paul Mallowood cleared his throat and began:

“By the terms of our father’s will, this house was left jointly to you and to Martin. As you know, I, as eldest son, felt keenly at the time that this disposition was an injustice to me. However, I have had plenty of time to consider the matter dispassionately in the intervening years. I realise that father’s intention was to safeguard your interests and Martin’s. At the time of father’s death Martin was still seriously incapacitated by the results of infantile paralysis: it seemed obvious that he would never be able to support himself. You, of course, had had no training for any career.”

Veronica interrupted here.

“As you knew, it was unthinkable to our parents that any daughter of theirs should have a career – other than a matrimonial one.”

Paul frowned over the interruption; he liked to be allowed to complete his

sentences, and Veronica's interpolation had broken his current of thought. His mind went off at a tangent: Veronica and matrimony... No man could ever have wanted to marry her. Handsome, yes. Intelligent, undoubtedly, but devoid of allure. Further, not only unattractive, but to him, almost repulsive. Her voice made him start as she put in:

"Yes? You were thinking?"

"I was trying to express my own thoughts clearly without reference to, er"

"To my attractiveness, or lack of it, in the matrimonial market," she said coolly, her eyes meeting his for a second with their inscrutable smile, and he hurried on.

"In the light of the fact that I and Basil were well established in the City, and that Richard was a rolling stone, a nomad by nature, there was a certain justice in leaving the house and the means for its upkeep to you and to Martin. I admit that now, though I resented the will at the time. I cared for this house, cared for it in away which neither you nor Martin did"

"That's a statement for which you have no real justification in fact," she responded. "Who can form a criterion of 'caring'? Oh, never mind. As you said, all this is 'familiar ground.' Naboth's Vineyard, oh King! Can't you break fresh ground?"

"If you will have patience with me, Veronica, you will see the point at which I am aiming. You will remember that after I had had time for consideration, I made an offer to you and to Martin concerning sharing in the upkeep of this house. Even before our father's death, his income was inadequate for the maintenance of Wulfstane. After death duties were paid it was obvious that the income shared by you and Martin would be too small to keep the place as it deserved to be kept."

"I seem to have heard most of this before," she replied. "Each time you have raised the point I gave the same answer, Paul. I did not mind being poor, but I had – and I still have – every objection to becoming your pensioner. That is a position which I refuse to accept."

"There is no question of your becoming my pensioner," he retorted. "My offer to you was a business-like proposition, involving mutual benefit. I was prepared to pay for the proper upkeep of house and grounds in return for the use of the east wing. It is virtually self-contained, and quite large enough for

what I wanted. However, you refused to consider my offer, though heaven knows, both common sense and the blood ties between us might have led you to perceive its equity.”

Veronica did not answer. Her eyes still rested on the distant downs, her profile was expressionless.

“Very well, then,” went on Paul, his voice hardening as he repressed the feeling which had vitalised his last sentence. “Let us leave the past and come to the present. I take it that you read the papers, or pay some attention to the state of the stock market.”

“Not more than I can help,” she replied, and Paul broke out:

“For God’s sake don’t play at being a complete fool, Veronica. It isn’t becoming to you. You must realise that the new paper combine has left your shares in Barton’s virtually valueless. The larger part of your income and Martin’s will cease. If your joint means were inadequate before, it is plain that your present financial position will be quite impossible.”

He paused a moment, and then, since he got no response, continued:

“I am your eldest brother, Veronica. It is not a matter of indifference to me to see you – and Martin – faced with poverty and indignity while I myself am well placed so far as this world’s needs are concerned. I want to help you. Why not meet me half-way and discuss things reasonably?”

She turned at last and met his eyes full, considering him in silence for a while before she replied; and then speaking deliberately, her deep voice very quiet and even.

“Thank you very much for your brotherly concern, Paul, but I would rather face matters without investing them in a mist of sentiment. You and I are both capable of looking facts in the face, and the facts are these. You have always disliked and despised me, and the feeling is reciprocated. The moment you saw me to-day that old sense of antagonism was so strong that you could have taken pleasure in slapping my face, as you did once long ago. I don’t blame you: I don’t even mind, but I’m aware of it. I know you resent the fact that Martin and I own this house, which you consider ought to be yours. You may be justified in your resentment. Again, I don’t care. I only know this. I will not accept anything from you, and I will not share this house with you. I don’t mind poverty, or loss of social prestige. What I should mind is being

dependent on you, or giving you any right of any kind to dictate to me. That is my answer. In short, leave us alone.”

Paul felt the muscles of his throat contract, and his pulses quicken, but he kept a tight hold on himself. His voice was still quiet as he responded:

“Having determined to leave sentiment out of the discussion, Veronica, you base your whole argument on it. Dislike is a sentiment as much as affection. Your feeling for me is quite immaterial in a business discussion. I make an offer to you on a business-like basis, and my reputation in the City is that of a man to be trusted in matters of finance. Again – I will pay for the adequate upkeep of this place, and put you and Martin in a reasonable financial position, if you will lease me the east wing as a self-contained unit for my own use. If the thought of living under the same roof with me is so repugnant to you, I am prepared to buy the house, and to pay such a sum for it that you and Martin can be independent elsewhere. It’s quite obvious that necessity will force you to sell – or mortgage – eventually. Why not consider my offer – without sentiment – if you are capable of disembarassing yourself of that quality.”

She studied him again, with that even, reflective stare, sitting very still; and Paul was aware of her strength, the strong muscles of smooth neck and arms, the physical fitness and nervous control which made her able to stay so immobile, graceful with the grace of a recumbent cat. What was there about her that raised this irritated response in himself, he wondered.

“Yes, you score a point in saying that I am biased by a sentiment of dislike, Paul,” she replied, her voice still even and unemotional. “However, there it is. I will not share the house with you, and I will not sell it to you. That is my final answer. Martin’s will be the same. In any case, he can neither sell nor sublet without my consent. Shall we consider this discussion closed? I am prepared to welcome you here as my guest at any time, provided your stay is not prolonged beyond that of the average guest, and I will do my best to entertain you hospitably as far as my means allow. I make that concession to the ‘blood ties’ to which you referred so feelingly a moment ago.”

She got up, and stood by the sunny window, her hands in the pockets of her tweed jacket, and looked down at her brother.

“How pleasant that we can both express our aversions in a manner so

academic, Paul! As a family, our mode of speech is remarkably uncorrupted by either temper or jargon.”

Paul got up too, and came and stood beside her, looking down at the sunny garden, where yellow leaves blew across the lawns.

“Yes. There’s still something to be said for breeding, Veronica,” he remarked dryly. “We don’t descend to face-slapping tactics in practice, whatever the trend of our feelings – but tell me this. How, in the name of common sense, are you hoping to maintain this property on the income remaining to you?”

She smiled. “Paul, don’t make me remind you again that you are here as a guest, and that there are limits to the intelligent inquiries made by such. We shall manage in our own way. Not your way; of course. It’s rather amusing. I told you that the whole family had coincided here. All of them – Richard and Basil, in addition to you, have been taking an intelligent interest in the stock markets. In other words, noting the effect on my income and Martin’s. Basil has suggestions to make, too.” She stretched herself, a tall powerful figure, too tall and too muscular for any woman, in Paul’s opinion.

“Action and reaction,” she mused. “Once, when I was fifteen and you were twenty-five, Paul, you lost your temper and you slapped my face. I probably deserved it, but it was a deplorable episode. Now, twenty-five years later, I haven’t forgotten it. If I am to accept advice and become dependent, I prefer to depend on the brother who did not lose his temper in the long ago. Then there’s this to it. The intelligent interest you advocated just now has led me to make a few inquiries. I don’t think that the paper market was reorganised entirely by the dispassionate action of unknown financial magnates. I think you may have had an interest in the opposition firm, so to speak, Paul. Now having said all that I’ve got to say, I will leave you to unpack. The bathroom in this wing is yours. We dine at 7.30, and tea is a movable feast from 4.30 onwards. I hope you’ll find everything you want here.”

She swung across the room and left her brother to himself. He stared down at the neglected garden, his mind echoing a phrase,” Naboth’s Vineyard.”

CHAPTER TWO

WHEN Veronica Mallowood went downstairs again after she had left Paul, she heard voices in the hall, deep voices, like Paul's – and like her own for that matter – but there was merriment in their tones, and she paused for a minute at the top of the stairs for the sheer pleasure of hearing the cheerful tones below. After Paul's heavy pomposity the sound of Richard's flippant, light-hearted staccato was tonic in effect.

The hall door was still open, and Veronica's twin, Martin, was just coming in, after examining Paul's car which still stood in the drive. He glanced up and saw his sister on the stairs and called cheerfully:

"Hallo, Ronnie! His Opulence has come then. Some car. Wish I dared pinch it. He doesn't need it, and I do."

"I was just suggesting to Basil that he should drive his own outfit into it and cash in on the insurance for a new one," put in Richard, and Veronica ran downstairs saying:

"Do be a bit sensible, all of you! Paul's upstairs, and we don't want to enliven the family reunion by more rows than necessary. Tea is in the drawing-room, or ought to be. Basil, go and put those guns away in the gun-room, and for goodness' sake take the cartridges out before you put them away. You're a menace with a gun. No one would ever think you'd been brought up in the country."

"He can shoot straight, Ronnie, all the same. We've got a couple of brace, of wild duck and a hare, not to mention the bunnies. Enough to help the larder out for a day or so."

It was Richard Mallowood who spoke, he whom Paul had called the "nomad" of the family. Standing beside her tall brothers, herself lacking very little of their height, Veronica completed a striking family group. Richard, next in seniority to Paul, was deeply bronzed, his face lean and healthy, his figure

upright, lithe and powerful. Some years back he had achieved not a little fame as a climber in the Himalayas, and the hardiness and powers of endurance which still carried him through hazardous journeys in the world's most solitary places were patent in his face and frame. Basil Mallowood, now forty-five years old, was as tall as Richard: like all the family, with the exception of Martin, he was dark headed and dark eyed, finely built and in good muscular trim, but his face was tired and sallow, with pouches below his eyes and heavy lines on his sagging skin. Basil was the product of a lifetime spent in a city office, Richard of a life spent in the open air. The one strove with his brains over the complexities of international finance, the other strove with his bodily energies against the forces of nature, and each carried the signs of their careers.

Martin, the youngest brother, was of more slender build; his fair hair and grey eyes masked the strong family likeness existing between all the brothers. He was inclined to weediness, justifying Richard's description of him as "a couple of yards of twine," and when he was tired his left foot dragged a little — heritage of the boyhood's disease which it had taken him half a lifetime to outgrow. Martin's face still twitched nervously at times, and the family liability to furious temper tended to break out in him even more fiercely than in his brothers. It was Martin who answered Veronica's last sentence.

"Tea? That's not a bad idea. I suppose we shall have Paul to cheer us up, looking down his nose at the family china. I hope you've had the Woolworth set put out, Ronnie. That'll get his goat. Does he still want to buy us out?"

"Shut up, you young ass," said Richard cheerfully. "If we're doomed to spend an evening en famille, do for God's sake let it be an evening without rows. We've had enough of that sort of thing in times past. The very thought of it makes me inclined to vomit. Basil, leave that gun alone. It's mine, and I'm not going to give it away. Lord, I'm thirsty! Come on, Ronnie. Hustle with that tea!"

He left the fireplace where he had been standing and with his arm through Martin's walked across to the drawing-room door and stood on the threshold for a moment.

"Ye Gods! Marvellous how this room's unaltered. It does bring things back... Teas for cricket teams, teas after a day's hunting, teas at Christmas... muffins and cream and Buzzard's cakes."

The long room looked very charming in the mellow light of the westering sun. The faded chintz and worn carpet had a charm not lost in their old age. The creamy panelling was light and gay in contrast to the sombreness of the hall. Cabinets holding silver and china behind gold trellised fronts showed the elegance of fine craftsmanship, and though carpet and curtains and covers were old “to the verge of dissolution” as Veronica said, the beauty of fine cabinet work, of noble proportion and beautiful wood, lent dignity to a room which contained nothing that was not fine of its kind.

Richard threw himself down in an armchair beside the fire, which groaned under his sudden onset, and Martin said:

“Here, steady on with the furniture! The springs are all ready to drop out. Ronnie and I will have to turn upholsterers if we’re to have anything to sit on.”

Richard stretched his long limbs and looked round the room:

“It all looks the same, on the surface, but it’s a bit worn... like an old car. Why not let Paul stump up, Martin? He’s simply rolling. He could put this place in order again without even noticing the cheques he’d have to write. Spoil the Egyptians. I’m all in favour of letting other people pay for my repairs.”

“I’m not, not if you’ve got to give them house-room and tolerate their uppishness,” replied Martin. “I know we’re in a mess, Ronnie and I, but the one thing we’re not going to do is to let Paul in on us. The minute he gets the chance he’s going to treat this place as his own, and then life would be pure hell. We had enough of Paul and his ways before the old man died. You remember. When I was a kid I remember you saying you’d rather be a deck hand on a stinking cargo boat than live at home here and be badgered by Paul and Basil.”

“Yes. I remember, and I’ve stuck to what I said,” said Richard ruminatively. “Basil used to be a fair-sized pest, too, but he’s improved with age. Don’t look so hipped, Martin. Something will happen to straighten things out. It always does. I’ve never been in a tight hole without something unexpected happening to help me out.”

“I feel such a damned, futile, incompetent ass!” burst out Martin. “I’ve just gone on living here, enjoying life in a vague sort of way without bothering about the future. I suppose I ought to have gone into a bank, or a

stockbroker's office, or something. Then I might have been in a position to put things straight for Ronnie. As it is, I suppose we shall have to start selling things, and go on selling things, until there's nothing left but the house, but I'm damned if I'm going to let Paul have his way, no matter what happens."

While Richard and Martin had been talking in the drawing-room, Veronica went up to Basil, who was still fiddling with Richard's heavy shotgun in the hall.

"I've been taking your name in vain, Basil," she said. "When Paul was lecturing me about the impossibility of keeping this place up and all the rest of it, I told him that you had offered to help, and I'd rather be beholden to you than to him. No. Don't interrupt. I'm not asking you for money. I wouldn't accept it if you offered it to me. I just used your name on the spur of the minute, mainly to annoy Paul. It'd make him livid to think of you acquiring the mantle he wishes to don himself."

Basil chuckled, but there was little merriment in the sound. His face was getting a sardonic expression as he grew older – the pronounced Mallowood profile tended to harshness rather than geniality.

"All right, Ronnie. Glad you warned me. We're a queer lot, aren't we? I wonder if all old families have the same quality of exasperating one another. We all used to quarrel like lunatics; you and I did, for that matter, but Paul baited the lot of us. As to the actual money question, that can wait." He frowned heavily for a moment, staring at the fire. "I suppose I ought to have come along before and seen how things were going with you and Martin."

"Thanks," cut in Veronica coolly. "After the entertainment we had here when father's will was read such magnanimity was hardly to be expected. I told you all then that the sooner you cleared out of my house, mine and Martin's, the better. I haven't asked you for help, and I'm not likely to ask you in future, but I used your name as a means of scoring off Paul. I don't trust him an inch, and I'm not going to let him think I've got to accept his help."

Again Richard chuckled. "Trust him? I'm with you there," he replied. "I know a thing or two about Paul and his ways. All on the right side of the law, sans dire, but he's not above playing a low-down game to get his own way. Right oh, Ronnie. I'll play up. I owe Paul a few backhanders for benefits received. Hallo, another car. Who's this?"

A small car had just come up the drive and pulled up beside Paul's gleaming Rolls. Veronica went to the open door, calling: "Hallo, Cynthia! Jolly of you to come. We're a family party. I warned you."

Basil Mallowood went out behind his sister, and opened the door of the small Morris saloon. Its driver slid out a neatly shod foot and then gave a cry of surprise as she looked up.

"Basil... Heavens above! I thought Veronica said that Paul was coming."

"He's here, and Richard's here, too. In fact the whole family! It's good to see you again, Cynthia! You look well."

Cynthia Lorne stared at him afresh before replying, her face puzzled and a little worried. Then she got out of the car and held out her hand to Basil.

"Thanks. I'm very well. What a surprising family you are. Hallo, Veronica. It's nice to see you!"

Composed of face again, she ran up the wide stone steps to greet Veronica with a kiss. The two women presented a striking contrast to one another; Cynthia Lorne was of average height, fair, soignée, her hair curled in the latest mode, her face delicately rouged with carmine lipstick emphasising the full curves of her mouth. In her short fur coat of bleached squirrel over a tailored beige suit, her impeccable legs garbed in the finest of silk stockings, she looked unsubstantial as she stood beside Veronica, and very much younger than her years. Cynthia was herself in the late thirties, but her corn gold hair and blue eyes made her look considerably younger.

Basil Mallowood had lifted out the suitcase from the back of the car and was carrying it up the steps when Paul came forward from the shadowy end of the panelled hall and held out his hand to Cynthia Lorne.

"This is a pleasure all the greater for being unexpected, Cynthia," he said. "It was a happy thought of Veronica's to ask you to enhance my last evening in England."

He held her hand as he spoke, looking down into her upturned face with an expression very different from that previously on his face. Basil, still holding the suitcase, caught a glimpse of all three faces – Paul's, Cynthia's and Veronica's, and their expressions gave him food for thought. Paul's, he thought, was merely fatuous. "Amorous old dolt," he said to himself. Cynthia's face was half-startled, half-amused. Veronica was smiling, with that strange

unmerry smile of derision, not untinged with disgust. Basil felt a sudden heat of anger rising in him. Veronica had done this on purpose – had asked Cynthia Lorne to come to stay in the house when both Paul and he himself were there, too. Veronica must have known, he meditated – known that both he and Paul had pursued Cynthia before she married that *matinée* idol, Cecil Lorne. She had got rid of him now – the divorce case had been undefended, and Cecil Lorne was now at Hollywood with his latest love. Basil was not devoid of a sense of humour in a cynical way. Angry though he was, he could see the humour of the present situation: himself and Paul and Cynthia, with Veronica looking on. Funny, if you looked at it dispassionately.

Meanwhile Paul, with his mannered courtesy, was leading Cynthia into the house.

“I believe tea’s waiting for us somewhere,” he said. “I expect you’re longing for it after your drive.”

Veronica’s voice cut in, curt and incisive.

“Come upstairs and find your room, Cynthia, and we’ll dump the baggage. I’ve put you in the blue room, because you said it was the only one you could find your way to without getting lost.”

Taking the suitcase from Basil, Veronica led her guest upstairs. Cynthia Lorne flashed a smile at Paul before she followed her hostess, and Paul turned away, after gazing at her figure as she walked upstairs, and found himself facing Basil, who was grinning sardonically.

“Afternoon, Paul. Quite a while since we’ve met. I hear a good deal about you in the City, one way and another, though we don’t often coincide at the same places.”

Paul nodded to his brother off-handedly, and thrust his hands into his pockets.

“Quite as well, perhaps. Our interests might not always coincide, either. Was it Veronica’s idea of humour to have a family party?”

Basil moved away across the hall to the drawing-room, talking as he went:

“Hardly. Ronnie doesn’t find the family good value in the entertainment line. Richard just blew in a few days ago, as though he’d just run down for the week-end, and he phoned me to come along for an exchange of views, so to speak. He picks up some useful information in the course of his travels.”

He entered the drawing-room with Paul behind him, and they found Martin lying in a chair convulsed with laughter, while Richard stood by the hearth, his back to the fire, looking very much at home.

“So you’re Paul,” he said, laughter in his deep-set eyes. “I should have recognised you, of course, though you’ve put a bit of weight on, like Basil. Don’t wonder, considering the rotten sedentary sort of life you chaps lead. I hear you’re going out Cast, doing a Cook’s tour, so to speak. You ought to have engaged me as courier. I could show you a thing or two that would surprise you.”

Martin scrambled to his feet and nodded to his older brother, and then laughed, a sort of nervous cackle which made Paul scowl.

“Glad I amuse you,” he said.

It was Richard who replied.

“If you hadn’t lost the capacity to laugh, you’d see there’s cause for it in the sight of us,” he retorted. “Four Mallowoods in one room. Lord! Can’t you see we’re funny?” He looked round at his three brothers with his bright mocking eyes. “I doubt if this queer old ant-heap of a world holds anything funnier than the four of us, all glaring at one another, all thinking we’re better than the others. We were born funny. Something odd in our make-up. We shall die funny. Take a seat, Paul, but be careful how you treat the furniture. It’s not really up to your weight.”

Paul disregarded his brother’s remarks and went to the window, where he stood looking out at the lawns, and lighted a cigarette.

“That turf’s in rotten bad condition,” he observed. “It’ll never be fit for anything if you don’t deal with those daisies – and plantains, too. Good Lord! It’s in a shocking state.”

“We like it like that,” said Martin. “Veronica and I make daisy chains when we’ve nothing else to do. Where are you going on your tour, Paul? Is it to be a pleasure cruise, or are you buying concessions, whatever concessions are, or going to settle the Indian problem for the government?”

“Neither. He’s going to find a suitable wife to continue the house of Mallowood,” said Basil, seating himself by the fire, and Martin went on:

“Funny to think we’re all unmarried. I suppose nobody’d look at us. We’re not exactly a beauty chorus when you see us en masse.”

“Speak for yourself, young ‘un, so far as matrimony’s concerned,” replied Richard. “I wondered which of my wives Veronica might prefer as week-end guest... but failed to make a decision.”

The door opened as he spoke, and Cynthia Lorne came in with Veronica.

“I don’t think you’ve met Richard, Cynthia. Mrs. Lorne, Richard.”

“It’s interesting to see you all together, sirs,” laughed Cynthia. “You’re uncannily alike – even Martin, although he’s fair.” She turned to Richard as Veronica seated herself at the tea table. “I know you’re a famous traveller,” she said. “What have you been doing this time, climbing impossible peaks?”

“Figuratively, I’m always doing that,” he replied, his bold eyes smiling down at her. “Actually I’ve been on the most prosaic of jobs in the most surprising places. Trading. Earning the wherewithal. In short, discovering things that the stay-at-homes want, and don’t know how to get.”

“He’s one of those plant-hunting wallahs, Cynthia,” put in Martin. “Brings back unknown primulas and new Tibetan poppies for wealthy gardeners to cherish.”

“That sounds a good scheme,” said Paul, his deep voice quite genial for once, his eyes on Cynthia. “You might try some experimental work in this garden, Richard. Naturalise the stuff here and market the offspring.”

Richard laughed. “I can see myself,” he said. “Try risking your own life to get a pinch of some unknown seed, and then you’d be likely to plant it in a flower pot when you get home. It isn’t only plants I collect,” he added to Cynthia. “I come across odds and ends of craftsmanship in out of the way places. Carvings, embroideries, gems – the latter not generally of the precious variety, but pretty enough – like this for instance.” He drew a piece of carved jade out of his pocket and handed it to Cynthia. “I got that from a villainous old Chink running one of the tea caravans to Tibet,” he said. “Some chap must once have spent half a lifetime carving it – all for it to be put up at Christie’s or Sotheby’s a few centuries later. Queer old world.”

“It’s lovely, one of the loveliest things I’ve ever seen,” said Cynthia, her fair face flushed in the firelight as she bent to examine the exquisite thing Richard had produced, and he replied:

“Yes; perhaps it is. The Chinese are connoisseurs of the tiny: they love detail, but they never lose sight of the whole. That piece got me completely: it’s

as near perfection as this imperfect world can produce.”

“If you’re interested in jade, I’ll keep my eyes open for you while I’m abroad,” said Paul, leaning forward towards Cynthia and the carved jade she held.

“Try the bazaars at Port Said, old man,” jeered Richard. “Marvellous what you can pick up!”

Cynthia Lorne turned towards Paul as she handed the jade back to his brother.

“Do tell me, just where are you going on this trip?” she asked, her eyes smiling at him, and he replied expansively:

“Oh, I haven’t settled a route, not in any detail. I’ve been working in the city for nearly thirty years, and I consider I owe myself a holiday – something worth calling a holiday. I’m going to Tunis for a step off, then doing a desert wander, then on to Kenya for some shooting. I shall probably work along to Dar-es-Salaam or Mombasa, and then cross to India, with Japan in view later. I’ve got the time now – the first occasion in my life when I felt I could leave everything and go away, and forget markets and tape-machines and cables and all the rest.”

“Call of the wild,” put in Basil flippantly, but Cynthia said with enthusiasm:

“Oh, I do think you’re lucky! I can’t imagine anything more satisfying than to pack up and leave all one’s everyday worries and boredoms behind. Aren’t you excited a bit? Isn’t it a marvellous feeling?”

Paul nodded, his hard-featured handsomeness lightened to something almost gentle and attractive as he smiled back at her.

“Honestly, it is,” he agreed. “I’ve been the creature of routine too long, and although Basil may jibe there is a longing in every man who has an ounce of virility to leave this complex mess which we call civilisation, and pit his strength against something elemental. Not that I want to stay away indefinitely. I’ve too much I value at home. I shall come back – all the better for having experienced a different set of values than those I’ve always lived with.”

Basil got to his feet, and Richard guessed that the sight of his brother talking thus to Cynthia Lorne was more than Basil could stomach. That phrase about “coming back,” – it was clear enough what Paul meant. He would come back when Cynthia’s decree was made absolute, and he seemed in no doubt

concerning his eventual welcome.

“She could take her choice. Not much in it, so far as I can see,” said Richard to himself, considering his two brothers. Both big men, both handsome, in that harsh uncompromising manner of the Mallowoods. “‘Townees’” Richard would have called them, despite their tweed-clothes and country shoes. Paul was wearing a plus-four suit of tawny Harris tweed, much too new and colourful to please Richard’s taste, with its elaborate leather buttons, knitted stockings to match with turnovers of black and orange, and aggressive brogued shoes, also new and immaculate. Paul looked large, opulent and well tailored in his country clothes but definitely no countryman. Basil’s heather mixture was much less noticeable: it was “‘decently worn’” as Richard put it, meaning old and comfortable, and his shoes and leggings showed contact with the earth and the woods: only his sallow face gave away that he was a town dweller.

“Aren’t you afraid of offering a challenge to fate, Paul? Or do you feel that you’ve subsidised fate?” It was Veronica’s voice this time, cool, slightly bored, and yet with an undercurrent of meaning in it which Richard strained his wits to comprehend.

“Fate? She’s like one of the Fates herself. ‘The damned queerest thing in the way of a woman I’ve ever met, and I’ve seen some,’” meditated Richard, as Paul replied:

“What on earth do you mean, Veronica? ‘Challenge to fate.’ Since when have you taken to dealing in clichés?”

“You said ‘I shall come back,’ as though it was within your power to command the future,” she said. “You meant ‘I intend to come back, and to continue my successful career successfully.’ I’ve no doubt you’ll achieve your intention, but your assurance seemed rather – challenging.”

Basil laughed from his place at the window. “Cheering, isn’t she? One of those plane crashes... a charging rhino, a jammed gun... a knife in the dark at an Eastern port. Life’s full of these little hazards.”

“He won’t come back.” Martin put in the statement in a dreamy voice which made them all turn and stare at him. He was gazing into the fire, his eyes dreamy, his face frowning, and Paul burst out:

“What the devil...”

Martin gave a jump, his long limbs twitching.

"Sorry," he said, "Idiotic thing to say. I was half asleep."

"That what you call remembering the future, Martin?" asked Richard. "If so, I'd leave the memories unspoken."

"Well, I knew we'd a vein of oddness in our make-up, but I never knew to what lengths the family lunacy could go," said Paul, and Martin jumped up clumsily and walked to the door.

Paul turned to Cynthia. "Really, we owe you an apology. Fatal prophecies from Veronica and remembering the future from Martin. Most peculiar!"

"Fortunately Cynthia knows us well enough not to be put off by our eccentricities, Paul," said Veronica, and he gave a forced laugh.

"I'm sure you're the most loyal of friends, Cynthia," he said, and Basil came back to the fire and stood there looking down at the others.

"That's a damned queer phrase of Martin's," he said. "Remembering the future... Has he been reading some of this new philosophic twaddle about the unreality of time?"

"If you ask me, the phrase is just one of these wish-fulfilment phantasies," said Richard. "Ask Paul here to remember the future. He'll see himself as Squire of Wulfstane, complete with a butler, two footmen and etceteras. Ask me. I am lord of an Eastern harem, with a foolproof holding on the rubber market, and western plumbing in an eastern palace. Ask Basil"

"Leave me out of it, thanks," said Basil. "Never mind Martin's odd remarks, Paul. He's always been a queer chap. Never got over that illness of his, but don't mention the word lunatic in this house. It has something sinister about it."

"Well, of all the queer families I've ever known, you are the queerest," put in Cynthia Lorne. "You've got a vein of the sinister in all of you. Why shouldn't Paul say 'I shall come back?'"

"It seemed to me an eminently reasonable statement of intention," said Paul. "Of course you could improve on it, Cynthia, by saying 'I hope you will come back.'"

She jumped up from her place by the fire, laughing, but Richard thought it a forced laugh.

"You must get out of this habit of tense earnestness, sirs!" she exclaimed.

“Perhaps there’s something in the atmosphere of this house – it’s so old and so eerie – but everything you say seems fraught with a double meaning, and I’m not going to play at Delphic oracles, or sybils, or whatever they were. Come and have a cigarette on the terrace, everybody, before it gets too cold.”

Paul and Basil went out with her into the garden. Richard stayed in his chair, and Veronica sat on, gazing into the fire.

“A penny,” said Richard at last.

She looked across at him, her face sombre now.

“Your thoughts for my thoughts – a fairer exchange,” she replied, and Richard answered:

“If there were any assurance of fair play on both sides the exchange would be an interesting one, Ronnie. The only thing I know about you is that you are the last person in the world to reveal your thoughts.”

“Yes. I have that much common sense,” she replied abruptly.

Richard went on, speaking more slowly and seriously:

“About Martin, Ronnie. He seems in a damn queer nervy state, as though he’s only half aware of what’s going on round about him. Does he still have those queer wandering fits he had as a kid?”

Veronica’s face contracted. “He’s all right when he’s left in peace, Richard. He’s been worrying over all this money business, and he’s always loathed Paul.”

Richard nodded. “Yes. I remember. Paul was the hell of a bully. He still is for that matter.”

“He’s not going to bully Martin and me, and that’s that,” replied Veronica.

Richard chuckled, and then went on, “I can’t help being amused over your friend, Mrs. Lorne, Ronnie. She looks at Paul and Basil with such childlike eyes, and asks them naive little questions. What’s the betting she knows more about them both than either you or I do?”

Veronica shrugged her shoulders. “She probably does, but the whole point about having her here this evening was to make Paul behave himself, and prevent any of those ghastly family discussions which always terminate in rows.”

“From which may the good Lord deliver us,” said Richard.

CHAPTER THREE

“‘T HANKING heaven for small mercies?’”

Richard’s voice broke in on Veronica’s train of thought as she smoked an after-breakfast cigarette on the morning after the Mallowood’s family gathering. Breakfast was a variable meal with Veronica and Martin. The former often omitted it altogether, the latter liked to seize a hunk of bread and butter from the pantry and eat it out of doors. This morning breakfast had been rather a strain on the haphazard Wulfstane staff. Paul had had coffee and toast taken to his room at seven, to enable him to make an early start on his drive to Croydon aerodrome. Cynthia Lorne, who never appeared at breakfast, had had a tray in her room at eight, and had left the house at nine. Martin had gone out without having breakfast at all, and Richard had had breakfast of a sort in the dining-room at eight-thirty. Veronica had come into the same room and breakfasted off an apple and an orange after seeing Cynthia off. She turned and considered Richard.

“Such small mercies as?” she inquired.

Richard chuckled. “Paul’s departure, for one. I saw him off in his swell outfit at quarter to eight. He was feeling positively genial. Thank God he decided to get the farewells over last night. The sight of all of us waving to Paul from the doorstep would have been too much for me on an empty stomach.”

Veronica laughed outright this time – a thing she rarely did. With her head thrown back and her white teeth gleaming, she looked much more human and normal.

“If you call Paul’s departure a small mercy you’re achieving a marvel of under-statement,” she replied. “The fact that he has been and gone, and that we haven’t had a full-dress row during his visit, seems to me a major miracle! Cynthia’s gone, too. She seemed as anxious to avoid touching farewells as Paul

did.”

Richard sat down in the window seat and started filling his pipe meditatively.

“It wasn’t too easy a situation for her,” he chuckled. “How happy could she be with either, were ‘t’other dear charmer away!’ It was a bit thick to land her in it like that, Ronnie. She’s been playing a nice little game of enjoying Paul’s and Basil’s society separately, and to be confronted with them both must have been a bit of a facer. I admired the way she trimmed her sails and steered a fair course without fouling any snags.”

“Oh, Cynthia has plenty of horse sense,” replied Veronica. “The reason that I asked her was that I thought rows might be more easily avoided if an outsider were present, particularly a woman. Paul has ideas on behaving prettily in the presence of ‘lady.’ ”

“Hm... quite. Noblesse oblige... Personally I think Basil could cut him out in that quarter pretty easily. Paul’s got the money bags, admittedly, but he’s a dull dog. If Basil gave his mind to it, he could leave him standing.”

“It struck me that Basil was preoccupied all the time. He’s got something on his mind,” said Veronica, and Richard nodded.

“You’re right there. He has. My God! I wouldn’t be one of these City wallahs for any money. Always worrying about the exchange and the stock market. If you ask me, Basil’s on the verge of a crash.”

“Basil? Rubbish! He’s always been the world’s cleverest over money.”

“That’s just it. It’s the clever ones who take the risks. Balancing on a tight-rope. If a deal comes off, well and good. A fortune for nothing. If it doesn’t, an almighty crash. You ought to take Paul’s offer, Ronnie. Basil may be a broken reed.”

She turned and faced him, scorn in her eyes.

“Take Paul’s offer? Sell him this house, and clear out, leaving him to gloat? Would you?”

“No, by God, I wouldn’t! But then, I’m independent of property. I travel light,” he replied. “By the way, has the post come? Basil wants his mail. He yelled at me from the landing.”

“The post doesn’t come till ten. Old Biggs still brings it up, and he’s as punctual as a clock. He’ll take back any letters you want posted. I’m going

across to Willow Farm now. See you at lunch?”

“Right oh. Will you tell the maid to take Basil his letters when they come – pronto, or he’ll be kicking up hell’s own racket – oh, and send him up some coffee. He likes to read his letters in bed. I’m going out for a stroll. Martin’s around somewhere. I’ll pick him up.”

“Do, and don’t badger him about his break yesterday. You know, when he said Paul wouldn’t come back. He says these queer things sometimes. I just disregard them. He’s all right, really.”

“He’s jolly lucky to have got you, Ronnie. I realise what you’ve done for him. At one time he was nearly off his rocker. Queer kid, but he’s the best of the bunch in some ways.”

“He’s a dear.” Veronica’s abrupt voice actually held some feeling this time. “When I remember the way Paul and Basil used to jibe at him I still see red. Are many families as foul as ours, Richard? There seems to be some streak of sadism in us, as though we enjoy hurting each other.”

“We’ve all got vile tempers, Ronnie, no use blinking the fact, and the way we were brought up, seeing the old man bully mother and then curse the lot of us, didn’t improve matters. Hell! I was afraid of the old devil. He was the only man I’ve ever met I’ve been afraid of. Still, I’ll give him his due, belatedly. He did the right and just thing when he left Wulfstane to you and Martin. I was mad about it at the time. I was broke for one thing, and I needed money badly. Oh, my Lord, how we all hated one another when that will was read! However, I’ve swallowed it all down now.” He looked around the handsome sombre room. “When I came back here this time I wanted to get one memory of Wulfstane not poisoned by thoughts of the old man. Thanks for letting me come. I’ll pack off later in the day and take Basil with me. You’ve had about enough of us.”

“I’m glad you came,” said Veronica. “You helped things out.”

“Me. Good Lord! I haven’t done much to help you, Ronnie. Look here, if I have any luck with selling my stuff in town, I’ll see what I can do to give you and Martin a leg-up – and I shan’t ask a quid pro quo, either.”

“I don’t think you would, but we shall manage somehow. Martin and I don’t mind being poor. The one thing I’m quite certain about is that I won’t let either Paul or Basil buy us out. I can’t tell you why, but they make me livid.

'They're dirty-minded, womanising beasts, both of them!'

'Don't be censorious, Ronnie. They're a product of their heredity and environment, both of them. Big, full-blooded fellows, occupying themselves over ledgers and money making. Too busy making their piles to marry – for which womankind may well be thankful. Well, cheer oh. See you later. I'm going to prowl round the estate.'

'All right. If you meet Martin don't let him get too whacked. I'll tell Ada about Basil's letters. Are you sure you won't stay another night?'

'No, thanks. Time I was thinking about my next move. I'll make Basil come up to town with me, and relieve you of his presence. He's a ponderous chap these days. There's a 4.30 train up from Sendover, isn't there? That will do me well enough.'

He strolled off and Veronica made her way to the kitchen, a frown on her face. She was a bad housekeeper, and she knew it. Further, despite her real love of the manor house and the land around it, she hated domestic detail and was unobservant and unskilled in the running of a house. Veronica knew that Paul had observed all the weak points at Wulfstane, the casual cleaning and lack of repairs, the clumsy service and bad cooking. Dinner last night had been a nightmare from the gourmet's point of view, and both Basil and Paul were connoisseurs of food. Veronica raged inwardly as she remembered the birds, overcooked, dry and tough, cold, as was both sauce and gravy, sodden vegetables and a leathery soufflé to follow.

Skilled service had come automatically in the old days, but the old servants had retired, and it cost too much to engage competent new ones. Neither had Veronica a knack for managing servants. She would put up with their ineptness for awhile without comment, and then fly out at them in a rage. Consequently the house suffered from a succession of new and incompetent servants. At present Wulfstane could boast of but three servants. A cook, so called; the parlour maid whose speech had exasperated Paul when he first arrived, and a half-witted house boy.

Veronica went into the kitchen and gave a few perfunctory orders to the cook, then bade Ada take up coffee and toast to Basil when the postman came.

'And how many more breakfasts, I'd like to know?' demanded Ada as

soon as her mistress's back was turned. The cook grunted.

"No call for you to grumble. You get the tips, don't you? I have the extra work and never see a sign of a tip."

Veronica heard these comments and understood them. Paul and Basil and Cynthia were all generous "tippers." Ada could be trusted to take Basil's breakfast up because it would be worth her while. With a sigh of relief Veronica turned from her domestic problems and went to the gun room. She often took a gun with her when she walked across the Wulfstane estates, and she was as good a shot as her brothers.

During the morning, after she had taken up yet another breakfast tray, Ada went about her work in lackadaisical fashion. She sang at moments, as she flipped round with a duster and straightened the rugs, and applied furniture polish in dollops which she did not bother to rub off. She had received a ten shilling note from Mr. Paul, left on the breakfast tray in his room, and five shillings from Mrs. Lorne. If Mr. Basil did the handsome thing she reckoned she could buy that new winter coat with the fur collar she had seen advertised in the morning's paper. Then, with a new hat, she would try for a new job in the Sendover registry. She was about sick of this place, with its miles of passages and awkward stairs. "Work enough for a regiment," she had declared to cook on her first day, "and something about this house gives me the jitters. It's all noises."

On that fine October morning when she worked, all the doors and windows in Wulfstane were wide open to the mellow sunlight, yet Ada still had a feeling of discomfort. She was for ever looking over her shoulder as her own shadow chased her on the worn wood floors. The boards creaked at every step she took, pigeons fluttered and tapped against the windows, the breeze made loose old casements tattle on their fittings, and Ada longed for the cheerful human bustle of a busy hotel, with visitors coming and going, and a radio full blast in the lounge. She had cause for complaint, too, this morning. Six bedrooms to do, and that Miss Mallowood lounging off never giving a hand at all, and Mr. Martin's bedroom in such a muddle she couldn't so much as begin to tidy it.

It was getting on for one o'clock when Ada had finished "doing" the bedrooms. Martin's was the last straw, for he was an incorrigibly untidy fellow.

Ada collected some odd tops and plates, whereon he had apparently taken an impromptu meal overnight, and with her hands full essayed to open and shut the heavy door of his bedroom. The wind from the open casement caught the door and shut it with a loud bang, knocking the ill-balanced crockery out of Ada's hands, and somehow she missed the awkward stair just below the door and fell her length with a loud yell. Sitting up dizzily, her hand to her head, she was beginning to moan loudly when Veronica's voice called from the staircase head:

"What was that?"

Ada groaned, "I had me hands full, and that dratted door just caught me. I'm bruised all over."

"Not that, you fool!" said Veronica tersely, and then Richard's voice put in from across the landing:

"What the deuce was that? Someone let off a gun in the house, or that was what it sounded like."

There was a distant peal as the ancient bell clanged below at the front door, and Veronica said sharply to the maid:

"Pull yourself together, Ada, and go and answer the door. Leave that mess alone for the moment."

Grumbling, nursing her bruised elbows, the girl went off downstairs and Veronica turned to Richard:

"That was a shot – upstairs," she said breathlessly. "Where's Martin?"

"The Lord knows, I don't," replied Richard. "That report came from upstairs – from the old playroom I thought."

He crossed the landing to Veronica's side, but before he reached her she was already running up the narrow stairs which led to the top floor. Richard followed close at her heels, and when he reached the upstairs passage he flung open every door he passed. Veronica, however, ran straight to the door of the room they called the playroom – a long room at the east end, in the more ancient part of the house. Catching the handle, she tried to open the locked door, and then hammered on it with her fists, calling:

"Martin, Martin, open the door!"

Richard came up behind her.

"Stand away, Ronnie. Let me see if I can get it open."

Veronica, white-faced now, and breathless, did as he bade her, and Richard attacked the old door with his shoulder, crashing his weight against it time after time, so that the house resounded with his efforts.

“Hell! I can’t make it budge,” he gasped. “It’d take a battering ram to get that door down.”

Unreasoningly, fear in her face and voice, Veronica banged on the oak panels again, calling Martin’s name.

“That’s no good, Ronnie. The only thing for it is a chisel and hammer, to cut the lock away from the jamb. I’ll go and get some tools,” said Richard.

He turned to run down the passage towards the stairs, and found himself facing a stranger, a solidly built man in navy blue.

“Anything wrong, sir? I heard the noise, and came up to see if I could help.”

“If you can help me to smash that door in, come along,” said Richard. “I think there’s been an accident. We heard a report up here – you can smell gun fumes now.”

“I heard it, too, sir,” replied the newcomer. “Are you Mr. Basil Mallowood?”

“No. I’m Richard Mallowood. Come on. It’s this door at the end. Now, both together...”

Veronica leaned against the wall while both men together flung their weight against the sturdy door. Their combined weight and strength seemed to make the old wails shake, but the door still held, and Veronica suddenly came to life, and raced for the stairs, crying:

“I’ll get you some tools.”

As she rushed downstairs she pushed past Ada and the cook, who were standing gaping, and Albert, the house boy mouthed senselessly at her as she ran. It was but a couple of minutes later that she was back again, a carpenter’s bag in her hand, and it was she who found a big chisel and heavy mallet, which Richard took from her.

“Keep back, Ronnie, There’s no room here,” he said, as he held the chisel against the door jamb, and swung the mallet to drive it home. The man in dark blue mopped his forehead as he watched, realising that the man wielding the tools knew what he was about. Half a dozen crashing blows from Richard

Mallowood's swinging mallet cut through the solid oak jamb, and then he threw the tools down, saying:

"That should do it, now then, both together again."

The renewed onslaught was successful. With a rending, tearing sound, the wood gave at last and the door burst inwards. The smell of gunpowder came out on them in a choking wave, as Richard and the stranger staggered and lurched into the room with the force of their impetus when the door gave. Richard checked himself by grabbing at a heavy table, and the other man heaved against him as Veronica cried wildly from the door:

"It isn't Martin, it isn't Martin after all!"

Richard recovered his balance and gave one glance across the room.

"Not Martin, it's Basil," he said tersely, and then turned back to the door, filling the aperture with his sturdy bulk.

"Clear out, Ronnie! No need for you to come in here. Go and phone the police. Do as you're told, and don't argue..."

He shoved the door close again, and turned to the stranger, who replied to the implicit question before it was uttered.

"Metropolitan Police, sir. Inspector Long. I came here to see Mr. Basil Mallowood."

"My God, that's it, is it?" inquired Richard. "Well, you're five minutes too late. That... was Basil."

A man's body was slumped forward in a big spindle-backed armchair which stood in the middle of the room. The heavy sporting gun which Basil had been experimenting with yesterday lay on the floor: a string was fastened to its trigger, and the same string was still looped round the right foot of the dead man. There seemed to be no question as to what had happened. The dead man's chin had rested on the muzzle of the upturned gun, his foot had jerked the string-tied trigger, and the resulting heavy charge "had made a fair mess of him," to use Inspector Long's phrase. The Inspector was pretty well inured to horrors, but the sight of the almost faceless corpse remained with him for many a day to come.

While Richard leaned against the doorpost, breathing heavily, the Inspector went up to the body and lifted one of the limp hands. He was in no doubt as to the condition he would find. The head was still bleeding hideously, the

blood not yet clotted. The man was dead – his brains had been scattered by the heavy charge at close range – but his body was yet warm. Richard Mallowood's estimate of five minutes was probably correct. Long undid the dead man's coat and again tested the temperature of his body – still warm. He turned to Richard.

"Can you be sure of his identity, sir? The lady mentioned another name – Martin."

"Martin is our youngest brother. He's fair-headed," said Richard. "This is Basil."

He came forward and himself lifted one of the limp hands, examining it and twisting the signet-ring on the first finger. "Poor devil! He said something about coming up here to look through some papers, so that he could work undisturbed."

He glanced round, and moved towards a table which stood beneath one of the windows. Papers and letters were scattered on it, and Richard was about to pick up a sheet when the plain clothes man stopped him.

"Don't touch anything, please. These must be properly examined."

Richard frowned down at the sheets.

"One of them is a message to me," he said, "I suppose I can read it, if I don't touch it. Damn it all, that's my brother, you know," he said, and his voice expressed some feeling at last – a sort of savage regret.

With Long at his elbow, Richard Mallowood read the scrawled sheet.

"Dear Richard. I apologise for landing you in this mess-up. It'll be less painful for all of you than the showdown if I'd lived. The post this morning brought me the news I expected, and I'm throwing my hand in. The accountants will tell you what it's all about. To save you and Veronica being asked the usual idiotic questions I'm leaving this statement. I am going to blow my brains out with your shot gun – its charge can be counted on to make the result certain. I waited until Paul was well away. The thought of him uttering pompous rectitudes over my remains isn't to be endured, and he'd have driven you all mad with his fussing. Bad enough as it is. Basil Mallowood."

"That is your brother's handwriting?" inquired Long.

Richard almost snarled at him. "Whose do you think it is? Mine? It's Basil's writing, poor devil, you won't have any bother about proving that. Why the hell did he do it? I can never see that bankruptcy is a good reason for blowing your brains out. What the devil does money matter?" He turned and

stared at Long. “Was it bankruptcy? – and where do you come in?”

“I’m sorry, sir, but there’s a warrant out for Mr. Basil Mallowood’s arrest. Alleged embezzlement. I came here to execute it.”

“My God... that was what he meant,” said Richard slowly. “Did he wait until he saw you plodding up the drive? Why the hell didn’t he foot it, days ago? Poor old Basil... sitting here, screwing himself up to do it, having written that letter... and tried to write others.” He nodded towards the grate, filled with torn and half-burnt fragments. “My God, if he’d told me straight out what was the matter, I’d have got him out of the country somehow – and be damned to you!” he added fiercely.

Long saw fit to ignore the last remark. It was enough to upset any man to see his own brother reduced to the state of sheer ghastliness represented by that thing in the chair. Long knew nothing about the Mallowoods as a family. He did know that Basil Mallowood had embezzled vast sums of money over a period of years, and that his skilful defalcations had only just been discovered by the accountants. He turned to Richard and said:

“You asked the lady, your sister, isn’t it, to phone through to the local police. You might see that she’s done so, and asked for the surgeon to be sent up. I must stay here until the local men arrive. We shall have to take photographs, and follow the usual routine, though it looks like a straightforward case.”

“Straightforward? It looks glaringly obvious to me, however, you have to observe the rules of your own mumbo-jumbo. I’ll go down to my sister. I expect she’s made the matter plain to the village cops. She’s a sensible creature.”

Richard turned and gave another glance at the body in the chair, and his face contracted. “Poor old Basil,” he said softly.

He went downstairs and met Veronica in the hall, speaking sharply to the servants. Ada was saying, “I’m not going to stop in a house where such things happen,” and Richard cut in sharply:

“Go and get on with your work. You’d better get the lunch served. It’s no use talking rubbish about not staying here. The police will want to question everybody who was in the house, whether you like it or not. Cut along, and don’t make more trouble.” To Veronica he said, “Come along into the morning

room.” He caught her arm and led her through a small room at the back of the hall, where the telephone was installed, into the morning-room beyond.

“You got the police station, and explained?”

“Yes. I told them Basil had shot himself. They’re coming straight up here. Who was that man who came upstairs?”

“A police inspector from the city. You’d better hear the story straight away. There was a warrant out for Basil’s arrest. Embezzlement. He knew – I suppose those letters he had this morning warned him. He chose to shoot himself rather than face the music. Sit down, Ronnie. You look all-in. It’s a grim business, but thank God Paul’s out of the way. He would have been the last straw.”

Veronica’s face was very white. “Yes. Thank goodness he’s gone. Richard, Basil did shoot himself, didn’t he?”

“Yes. He did. The old method String round the trigger and a loop over his toe. Why? What are you thinking about?”

“I wish I knew where Martin was. I don’t want him to blunder in to all this and just be told anyhow. It’ll be an awful shock for him, and he’s queer sometimes if things upset him. The police won’t want him to go upstairs – and see Basil like that, will they?”

“God knows what they’ll want. Can’t see any object in such a course myself. Basil left a letter, saying he was going to shoot himself. It’s all plain enough. Beastly business. Don’t wonder you’ve got the horrors, Ronnie. It was enough to turn any one’s stomach. If he had to do it, he might have done it somewhere else. Suicides are like that – so absorbed over their own problems they can’t envisage the result on other people. Still, he left that letter. Clears things up a bit.” He looked at her steadily. “Don’t go imagining things, Ronnie. It’s all plain enough. Bad, I grant you, but it might have been worse.”

She sat very still, and then asked, “That letter, you saw the writing?”

“Yes. I saw it. Basil’s writing. Unmistakable – and the ink hadn’t dried black. That plain enough for you? Good. You stay in here. I’ll go and look out for the local bobbies, and keep an eye open for Martin, and once again, don’t go imagining things. If that Inspector bloke thinks you’re anxious about Martin, they’ll start badgering him when he does turn up. Got that?”

Veronica nodded, and Richard went out into the hall just before a car drew

up with the Superintendent and his men from Sendover, the nearest town, some five miles away.

It was an hour later that Inspector Long came and found Richard Malloewood, saying:

“Now, sir, if you can spare me a few minutes?”

Richard got up from his seat by the fire in the hall, and knocked his pipe out.

“All right, Inspector. Shall we go into the morning-room, at the back of the hall there?”

The first few minutes were spent in putting down Richard’s name and age, and details of his arrival at Wulfstane. The next inquiry was concerning Basil’s arrival – on the Monday evening. It was now Wednesday. Richard said:

“I hadn’t been home here for some time. I’ve been out East for three years. I thought it would be pleasant to get Basil to come along while I was here, so I phoned him at his city office on Monday, and he agreed to come for a couple of days.”

“He didn’t give you any idea that he was worried, sir?”

“Not directly. I thought that he sounded nervy, but in my experience all these city men live on their nerves. While he was staying here he let out a few comments indicating that he had business worries. Swore about the complications of international finance, and the difficulties of collecting money from subsidiary companies in South America. He wanted information about Chinese currency and the silver market, which I was in a position to supply. I could tell he was worried, but I had no notion of the jam he was in.”

“Quite so,” said Long urbanely. “Now I want details of people in this house – just as a matter of routine.”

“This house belongs to my youngest brother and sister, Martin and Veronica. They live here, as they have always lived. There are two women servants and a house boy, and a gardener who lives at the lodge. Last night we were a party of six: Veronica and Martin; our eldest brother, Paul, who left at 7.30 this morning, Basil and myself, and a woman friend of my sister’s, a Mrs. Lorne. She left at nine o’clock this morning. She was asked to spend the evening by my sister, who didn’t relish the thought of a party with four men and only one woman.”

The Inspector scribbled industriously, and then asked:

“Could you give me an idea of what happened this morning, sir, up till the time when you heard the shot?”

“I’ll try. I knew Paul was leaving early, he was setting out on a holiday abroad. He said good-bye to the family last night, to save them all getting up at cock-crow. However, I’m an early riser by choice, and I went into his room at seven to see that he was awake. The maid brought his tray in, and I left him to it and went and had a shave. A little more than half an hour later I helped him down with his baggage and getting his car out; the gardener was about, but Paul doubted his capacity with cars. I say, stop me, if I’m wasting your time. I don’t know how much detail you want.”

“All I can get. Please go on just as you’ve begun.”

“Right. I saw Paul into his car, and saw that the gardener shoved the suitcases into the boot, and waved to him; you know the usual fatuities of an English leave-taking. Martin leaned out of his bedroom window and yelled ‘God speed,’ or some such Tommy rot. Then I went upstairs and finished dressing. I looked in at Basil before I came down again. He was awake, sitting up in bed smoking. I told him Paul had gone, and he asked what time the post came. I said I’d find out, and he asked me to have his letters sent up with his coffee. Then I went downstairs and had breakfast. That would have been about half-past eight. I heard Veronica come downstairs with Mrs. Lorne about nine, and she – Mrs. Lorne – went straight off in her own car. I think she was driving to Brighton to see some friends. A little later I came back to the dining-room; Martin had gone out by that time, and my sister was having breakfast or what she calls breakfast. I asked her about the mail, and she said she’d have Basil’s letters sent up on his tray when the postman came about 10.0. I went up to Basil again and told him he’d have to wait for an hour or so – he was still in bed. I asked him if he’d come out for a walk, but he didn’t want to. Said he’d got some letters to write, and that he’d go up to the old playroom so that he could work in peace. I went out myself about ten minutes later, and walked up to the top of Bonner Down. I was out all the morning, and came back for lunch soon after 12.30. I was in the bathroom at the east end of the first floor when I heard the report upstairs – and the rest you know.”

“Thank you, sir. That’s an excellent clear statement. The only other thing I want to ask you just at the moment is this. That shot gun which your brother used, was it his own?”

“No. It was mine. I was shooting with it when we were out yesterday. Basil and Martin and I had a day out together with our guns, and Basil took a fancy to mine. He wanted to buy it from me, but I wouldn’t let him have it.”

“Was the gun put away when you came in?”

Richard frowned. “No. I don’t think it was. When we got back – about tea-time – we found Paul had arrived, and Mrs. Lorne came a few minutes later. Basil said he’d clean it in the gun-room later. Actually he took it up to his own room. I saw it there this morning, but didn’t say anything. Lord, oh Lord, how was I to know?” asked Richard wearily. “He might have used his own gun, poor devil. Rotten business!”

“A very sad business,” agreed Long. “I should like to offer you my sympathy, sir. It was a shocking thing to see your own brother like that.”

Richard nodded. “Ay. I wish my sister hadn’t seen it. Worse for her than for me. Bad enough for anybody, but horrible for a woman.”

Long nodded his head in sympathy. Basil Mallowood might have been a bad hat, but his end was indeed “a shocking thing.”

CHAPTER FOUR

LONG was a very painstaking and conscientious officer. His mission for the arrest of Basil Mallowood had turned out very differently from what he had planned, but Long determined to collect all possible data and make a tidy job of it before he sent in his report to his superior officers. The Coroners Inquest would be a "local job," straightforward enough in all conscience, but Long intended to get his own report set out in full. Superintendent Watson of Sendover, was quite willing to have Long's co-operation in the matter, and was glad that the Inspector had been on the spot, for Long's own evidence was very useful. He had heard the report of the gun from the upper floor of the house, and he had examined the body within a few minutes of death.

Long, having considered Richard Mallowood's statement and found it satisfactory, then asked if he might see Veronica. He had with him in the morning-room a junior officer who had accompanied him to Wulfstane – Sergeant Beach. When Long had entered the house in the first place, intent on locating the noise caused by Richard Mallowood's assault on the door upstairs, Beach had remained on duty at the open front door. Later he had entered the hall, and had heard Ada and the cook talking in the macabre manner of their kind.

When Veronica Mallowood came into the morning-room, Long got up politely and murmured a few words of conventional sympathy. He felt rather nonplussed by Veronica: she was something fresh in his experience, and her calm, cold dignity was somehow as surprising as her unusual height and statuesque appearance. Long was not accustomed to a woman looking down at him, and Veronica's dark eyes had a quality which puzzled him and made him wary. Generally a reasonable man, Long was guilty of unreason when his mental reaction to Veronica formulated itself. "My hat! she looks capable of

anything.”

“Thank you,” said Veronica in reply to his greeting, seating herself deliberately, but not in the chair which Long had set for her, and then waiting for his questions. Her answers covered the same grounds as Richard’s in the main, and she had very little to add. She repeated Richard’s inquiries on Basil’s behalf for the letters, and said that she had told the maid to take his post up with his breakfast tray. On leaving the kitchen she had gone upstairs and had called good morning to Basil through his bedroom door. She had not gone in but had heard him reply, and had told him that she was going out. She was out all the morning until twelve-thirty, when she had gone straight up to her bedroom, having entered the house by the drawing-room window. She had been at the door of her own room when she heard the gun go off, and had heard and seen Ada drop the tray by Martin’s bedroom door. Richard had appeared on the side of the landing where his own door was situated; furthest, that is, from the stairs which led to the upper storey where the old playroom was situated.

Again, thought Long, a clear concise statement, untinged by any feeling. Veronica spoke deliberately, her deep voice worrying Long in some way. It was not like any woman’s voice he had ever heard. He asked her if she had observed any signs of nerviness or depression in her late brother, but Veronica replied:

“He seemed very much as usual to me. I noticed no difference except for the fact that he had aged considerably since I last saw him. His hair was getting a bit grey, and he was heavier than when last I saw him.”

“Mr. Basil Mallowood was not a frequent visitor here, then?” inquired Long, and she replied:

“No. He seldom came. He preferred city life to country life.”

Long nodded, and then said, “Might I see your brother, Martin, next. I might as well get all these statements finished straight away.”

“Martin is still out. We – he and I – spend most of our time out of doors. He may not be back until evening.”

Long racked his brains afterwards to understand why something in her voice caught his attention. The deep tones were just the same. Veronica sat looking out of the window, her expression a little bored, her hands resting

slack and still on her knee, but somehow Long figuratively pricked up his ears. He glanced back a few pages in his notes; and then said:

“I take it you did not see him this morning? He went out before you came downstairs?”

“I saw him from my window, as he went out. He was going through the spinney and later walking over to Wendle Mere – about five miles away. He often shoots there. He lost a pocket-book while he was out with the others yesterday, and he thought he might have dropped it there. I saw him later in the morning – about twelve, when I was walking back from the farm. He had been to the spinney and spent some time there, bird watching. I saw him cross Wendle Beacon and waved to him when I was in the valley.”

“Oh, did you...” said Long to himself. He was writing busily, but in his ears was Veronica’s cry – in a very different voice. “It isn’t Martin! It isn’t Martin after all.” She’d probably forgotten that: the shock of seeing Basil’s body had made her forget those tense minutes.

“Since you have volunteered that, I might as well get it clear,” he said. “Have you an ordnance map, or some large scale map of the locality you mention?”

Veronica made a gesture towards the bookcase. “You’ll find one there,” she said evenly.

Long found the map, and spread it flat on the table. He put his pencil on the Manor House, clearly marked on the map, and then found Wendle Mere – about five miles away, as Veronica had stated.

“Can you show me the point where you met Mr. Martin?” he inquired.

Veronica took the pencil and made a mark with it.

“Here,” she said. “This is the border of the spinney, and this the road I was walking on. Martin left the road on the further side and walked up the down by one of the sheep tracks. I sat on the stile there watching him climb. It’s pretty steep. He waved to me, as he went over the top and then I came home.”

“You came home direct, by the road?”

“Yes.”

Long nodded. “What it really amounts to is this. Your brother Martin must have been some miles distant from the Manor when you reached home, provided he kept on in the direction he was going when you last saw him?”

“Yes,” replied Veronica, and Long nodded.

“Thanks. That clears that point. Could I now see your house parlourmaid, Ada Brown?”

“I’ll send her to you.”

Veronica went out, and Sergeant Beach put in in a low voice, “This other Mallowood – Martin – is he a fair chap?”

Long nodded:

“They’re all alike, aren’t they?” said Beach. “You couldn’t mistake them for anything but brothers and sister. I caught a glimpse of the fair one, Martin that’d be, when I was on duty by the hall door. He was just cutting across the garden.”

“Was he?” said Long thoughtfully, and added, “Why the deuce did she put that bit in? She looks sensible enough.”

“She reminds me of something in the Natural History Museum,” said Beach, and Long swallowed a snort of laughter... mammoths, pterodactyls, saurians.

“She’s by way of being an outsize,” he murmured.

Ada Brown was dealt with firmly, and her natural garrulity not given much chance. Long only wanted a clear, foolproof table of events with corroboration. If there were any “funny stuff” in this case, it would be for somebody else to deal with. Ada produced the following facts and was prepared to swear to them. She had taken up Mr. Paul’s breakfast tray at 7.0 o’clock. He was still in bed, but awake, the curtains of his room drawn back, and it was quite light in the room. After giving him his tray, Ada had gone out again and fetched his shaving water. When she came back with it, Mr. Richard Mallowood was in the room, chatting to his brother, and she met Mr. Basil in the passage, coming back from the bathroom. He looked half-asleep – and not half bad-tempered. Both Richard and Basil had been in their dressing-gowns. Ada had then laid breakfast in the dining-room, and made tea for Richard, who had been quite chatty.

Next, she went and prepared a tray for Mrs. Lorne and took that up, and she gave Long to understand that she’d seen enough of breakfast trays to last her “her natural.” Miss Mallowood came down and saw Mrs. Lorne off about nine o’clock, and then went and had her own breakfast in the dining-room –

“apples and oranges, like a monkey,” said Ada. Finally Miss Mallowood had “put the lid on it” by telling Ada to take a tray up to Mr. Basil, as though she hadn’t got enough to do, what with six bedrooms and no one to give her a hand. Long expressed a modicum of sympathy here, and encouraged Ada to go on with her statement. The post came at 10.0, “same as usual,” she went on, and she had then taken up Mr. Basil’s tray and his letters, two of them, one a long one, sealed, both with London postmarks. Mr. Basil was up, but still in his pyjamas, “not ‘arf gaudy, neither,” said Ada. He was shaving in front of his mirror, and he told her “to bung the tray on the table, and leave him in peace for an hour” – “which I done,” said Ada. “I didn’t go and do his room until nearly twelve. He was upstairs then. I heard him galumphing round. Awful to think about, it is. Me doing the bedrooms and him up there with that gun. Gives me the proper horrors to think about it. He had that gun in his bedroom, too. I saw it when I went in to turn the beds down last night.”

Ada could tell Long nothing about the rest of the household during the morning, except that they had gone out. She had seen Miss Mallowood set out with a gun under her arm before the post came. Mr. Martin and Mr. Richard went out earlier. “Leastways, I didn’t see them about, nor hear them neither, and Mr. Richard you can always hear him when he’s about the house. Whistles and sings to himself all the time.”

Long asked her if she had ever seen Paul and Basil and Richard before this visit, and she shook her head. “No, never, but you could tell they was all brothers, they’re that alike – Miss Mallowood’s like them, too. She’s a queer creature,” said Ada. “Not like any lady I ever set eyes on before. Gives me the hump to look at her, and don’t she just hate those brothers of hers, Paul and Basil, both of them. I’ve heard her say some things about them, too. My word I have!”

“And my word, you’ll be getting yourself into trouble if you go gossiping about your mistress,” said Long.

“Well, you’re police, aren’t you? There’s a thing or two you ought to know,” said Ada ominously, but Long did not encourage her to go on. He had the facts he needed, and that was enough. He could make a clear reconstruction of the events of the morning up till the time Basil Mallowood went upstairs, and as for the actual shooting, there was no ground for doubting that it was what it

appeared to be – a suicide. The door of the playroom had been locked on the inside – the big old key was still in the lock when Long had examined it, and the man had not been dead for more than ten minutes when they got the door open. The letter to Richard had been written by Basil himself, and written recently, as its ink testified. Long was no expert over handwriting, but he was certain that the letter left for Richard was written by the same hand as that which had written some notes found in his pockets, and on the labels of his suitcases.

After Ada had been dismissed, Long sat and meditated for a while. It was all straightforward enough, except that statement of Miss Mallowood's about having seen her brother Martin while she was out in the morning. If she had seen him and talked to him, why had she called his name as she banged on the door of the playroom? There could be only one answer. She had reason to believe that Martin might be likely to shoot himself... but then when she had seen the body and knew that it was Basil who was dead, why had she told that story of seeing Martin climbing Wendle Beacon, three miles away? Obviously to prove that Martin could not have been in the house when the shot was fired. Long puzzled afresh. That door had been locked from the inside, there was no doubt about that. The casement window was jammed-to, and below it was a clear thirty foot drop, no ledge or pipe or creeper to assist a descent. The most skilful of cat-burglars could not have found a means of getting down that wall. Then there was the manner of the shooting to be taken into account. The muzzle of the gun must have been below the dead man's chin when it was fired, the stock on the floor. The body had not been moved, Long was certain of that, as was Superintendent Watson. Basil Mallowood had been sitting in the armchair when he shot himself – and the letter he had left was in his own handwriting. It was a puzzle. If it had not been for Veronica's statement about Martin the whole thing would have been perfectly simple. The Inspector turned to Sergeant Beach.

"You say that you saw a man whom you assumed to be one of the Mallowoods, because of his likeness to his brother, when you were on duty at the front door?"

Beach nodded. "That's right, sir. He was crossing the lawn, walking towards the house from the shrubbery on the west side. He was a tall chap, a

good six-foot I'd say, and pretty lean. He had no hat on, and he was fair-haired, but apart from that he was very much like the other one, Richard. I lost sight of him as he got near the house – this side he was making for – and he didn't appear again."

"When you saw him, he was coming towards the house, not going away from it?"

"Yes, sir."

Long considered anew, and then, leaving Beach in the morning-room, he went and consulted Superintendent Watson. The latter had made a careful list of every member of the Wulfstane household at the time the shot was fired – Veronica and Richard on the first floor, the former in her bedroom, the latter in the bathroom. Ada Brown was at the door of Martin's bedroom, also on the first floor. The cook was in the kitchen. Albert, the scullery boy, in the coal cellar. The gardener, Higgins, was in his own cottage at the entrance to the drive, his dinner hour being 12.30 to 1.30. Higgins had seen Richard Mallowood coming up the drive about 12.25, just as he (Higgins) had knocked off for dinner. None of them had seen Martin since he left the house after breakfast, neither had Veronica been seen returning to the house. Higgins corroborated Richard Mallowood's statement about Paul's departure that morning, the gardener saying that Paul got his car out of the garage himself, and fussed around like an old woman over it. Higgins also corroborated the fact that Martin had leaned out of the window and called good-bye to Paul, who had responded with a wave of his hand. "Didn't half fancy himself, and just reeked of money," was Higgins' comment about Paul. "Nice brother, he is," went on the gardener. "Them two, Miss Mallowood and Mr. Martin, they haven't a bean between them to keep this place up. There used to be six gardeners here in the old days and a proper staff of servants, and look at the place now! Call it a garden? I'm ashamed of it, and that's flat, but what can one man do in a place this size? When I see that Lord Tom Noddy with his Rolls Royce car and his high and mighty ways, it was as much as I could do not to give him a piece of my mind."

Long went back to the house, pondering anew. Such properties as Wulfstane were new to his experience, but he had thought that the house looked neglected, and certainly the servants were a poor lot. When he got

back, Watson had just received a phone message in answer to an inquiry he had made (at Long's suggestion). The authorities at Croydon air port stated that Mr. Paul Mallowood had left by the 10.0 o'clock plane for Lisbon that morning, his passport having been duly examined, and his tickets and reservation being all in order. His car had been left to be taken up to his garage in town by a man from a local firm.

Watson pulled his right ear thoughtfully.

"It's all ship shape barring that statement of Miss Mallowood's about her brother, Martin, and the fact that he hasn't shown up himself," he said thoughtfully. "I'm inclined to think we needn't pay too much attention to that. I've heard a good bit about these Mallowoods, one way and another, since I've been at Sendover. Mr. Martin had infantile paralysis when he was a lad and he wasn't much better than a cripple for years. His sister looked after him, and she was wonderfully devoted to him, folks said. Now this tragedy's happened to her other brother, Miss Mallowood gets frightened in case Martin should be suspected of having a hand in it, and she tries to make an alibi for him, so that he needn't be bothered by questions, him being a nervous fellow. You know what women are."

"If you're trying to tell me that Miss Mallowood is the 'womanly woman' with motherly tendencies, I'm afraid I shall take a lot of convincing," said Long.

"Also, I shouldn't have put her down for any sort of fool, although she's behaved like one to-day."

"A bit contradictory, aren't you?" grinned Watson, and then continued: "This statement by Sergeant Beach that he saw a man cross the lawn, and the man resembled Mr. Richard Mallowood, and so it must be Mr. Martin, Beach never having set eyes before on Mr. Martin, well, I don't take it very seriously. Beach might have seen someone quite different. Wulfstane's quite a famous house in its way, and sightseers do come and stare at it without a by-your-leave."

Long sat and frowned, and then answered, "Well, leaving out the muddle about Martin's whereabouts, can you tell me this. Even if Martin had wanted to shoot Basil, how could he have done it in this particular way, inducing his brother to sit still in a chair while the muzzle of a gun was put under his chin,

and a string fixed over his toe, remembering that the brother previously wrote out a statement that he was going to shoot himself. Remembering also that the door of the room was locked on the inside, that there is no trapdoor in the ceiling, and a thirty-foot drop from the window to the ground?"

Watson nodded his ponderous head. "Yes, I'm remembering all that," he said. "Also the fact that according to your evidence – and I'm not questioning it – deceased had not been dead for more than a very few minutes when you found him. Bearing all that in mind, I don't see there's any room for explanations which aren't obvious explanations. I think Miss Mallowood is just making a muddle of things. Come to think of it, she'd had a fair-sized shock seeing one of her brothers in that ghastly state. Enough to upset any woman."

Long nodded absent-mindedly. He was recollecting Veronica Mallowood as she sat in the chair by the window answering his questions; her calm face and even voice, the still, strong hands, lightly clasped on her knee, the immobility of her statuesque figure. A prey to nerves? Long did not believe it.

Then he remembered her voice, when he had heard her calling as he ran upstairs, "Martin, Martin; open the door!" The two memories were contradictory.

"Well, I shall be interested to hear what Martin says when he does turn up," he said at length to Watson. "It'll be a bit odd if he doesn't come back, though," he added.

Watson stared – and then went on staring.

"By heck!" he said; "By heck..."

Then he slammed down his fist on the table. "If you think he did it, tell me how he did it!" he exclaimed. "Any way, that body isn't Martin Mallowood's. I've seen him. I can tell you that, and the handwriting of that letter isn't Martin's, either."

Long grinned this time.

"It's a teaser," he said. "Either you've got a case that is blatantly obvious, or else you've got one that is so complicated that it beats the band. Still, it won't do any harm to have a look-out kept for Martin, in case he doesn't come back before the inquest."

"All right. I'll see to that, though you mark my word, it won't be necessary," said Watson, and Long went on:

“I wonder if they can provide us with a few family photographs. They might come in useful. I’ll ask Richard Mallowood. He seems a sensible sort of bloke. Meantime, I’ve got my report, and I shall have to be beating it back to town. Let me know when you’ve fixed the time of the inquest. You’ll have a unanimous verdict, that’s one thing. No jury will want to split hairs over a case of this kind. Much too obvious, and my evidence will outweigh half a dozen Martins.”

Going out into the hall again, Long found Richard Mallowood there, standing by the open front door, looking out at the garden. He turned at Long’s approach, and said:

“You chaps ought to have a meal. I know you’ve been hard at it, but our family tragedy oughtn’t to deprive you of your food. I’ve had some ham and cheese and beer left in the dining-room for any of you who would like it.”

“Very good of you, sir. I’ll tell the others. There are just one or two other things I wanted to ask you.”

Richard nodded. “Ask away, here, or in the morning-room?”

“In there, I think, sir. Servants have a habit of listening in.”

“They do, and the variety here aren’t out of the top drawer in the servant line. Nasty pair of wenches,” observed Richard.

Once back in the morning-room, Long asked:

“Have you, any photographs of your brothers, sir? I should be glad if you could let me have any.”

Richard Mallowood stared. “Photographs? What on earth for? I haven’t got any myself, and I don’t think my sister has. As a family we don’t tend to sit for our portraits. I’ll ask, and have a look round, but I think it’s doubtful if I can find any. I certainly haven’t seen any about. What’s the idea?”

Long considered for a moment before he replied, and then said, “There’s only one point which isn’t clear in this case, so far as I can see, sir. I’m telling you this in confidence, of course, and I hope you won’t misunderstand me.”

He then told Richard about Veronica’s statement concerning Martin, and Beach’s testimony about seeing a man who might be assumed to be Martin. Richard meditated for a moment in silence, and then said:

“You’re feeling it doesn’t make sense. You heard Veronica calling Martin’s name outside that infernal door, and then she goes out of her way to tell you

that he was miles away at the time. That it?"

Long nodded, glad in his own mind that Richard showed the shrewd commonsense Long had expected from him.

"Yes, sir. It seems contradictory, and was really quite unnecessary, because the whole case was straightforward enough."

"Obviously," said Richard dryly. "No fancy explanations needed. To understand my sister's behaviour, Inspector, it's necessary for you to hear a bit of family history. Martin had infantile paralysis when he was sixteen. He made a much better recovery than the majority, but the disease left its marks on him. Although he's a big fellow, he hasn't much stamina. He tries to live an ordinary country life, but gets exhausted in doing it, and becomes a prey to the blackest sort of depression. My sister has always lived with him and looked after him. You can understand that when any trouble seems imminent, or anything abnormal occurs; her immediate reaction is Martin. 'Is Martin all right?' When we heard that shot above our heads this morning, it was obvious to both of us that something was wrong. We're used to guns in this family. We knew no one was letting off a gun inside the house for fun. Veronica's reaction, as usual, was 'Martin.' My own was nearer the mark." He paused, musing a while, his face furrowed and sad. Then he went on, "I don't want you to think that Martin had explicitly threatened to commit suicide when he had one of his black fits on him. He may have done. I don't know, but I understand Veronica's break from commonsense. She was afraid, and she lost all sense of logic and reasoning. I don't know if it's a fact in your experience, as in mine, that the people who threaten to commit suicide are generally the last to do it," he added.

"So I've heard it said," agreed Long. "You wouldn't have expected your brother Basil to do such a thing, then?"

"No, I shouldn't," agreed Richard bluntly, "but I have noticed, speaking in generalisations again, that money troubles cause more men to commit suicide than any other factor. However, your next point concerned the chap on the lawn seen by your sergeant. It couldn't have been Martin. If he'd changed his mind and doubled back home he'd obviously have come in for a meal. It was probably a man I saw in the village yesterday – a tall, fair fellow. He asked if I knew where he could find Mr. Basil Mallowood. I think it's likely he mistook

me for him at a first glance. I didn't care for the look of the chap, a dun or a tout I sized him up as. I replied, 'Why not go back to London, where he lives?' and left it at that. I didn't see why Basil shouldn't have a day or two's peace while he was down here."

Long hitched up his eyebrows. "Then you guessed that duns might be likely to appear, sir?"

Richard Mallowood shrugged his broad shoulders.

"I'm not prepared to put it in as evidence, Inspector, but I don't mind chatting, if you'll put that notebook away. It's not fair to ask a maw to repeat surmises on oath."

Long put his pencil down, and Richard went on:

"My brother Basil, as you know, was reckoned a wealthy man. I'd always thought of him as such, not that I envied him, because I've found during the course of my sinful life that some of the most discontented men on earth are to be found among the wealthy ones. They're everlastingly worrying about adding to their pile. When I saw him on Monday evening I thought to myself that for all his shekels I wouldn't be in his shoes. Later, as we got talking, I wondered a bit. I could tell from some of his inquiries that everything in the money garden wasn't lovely. It occurred to me that he was pressed for ready money. I've known that happen when a reputedly wealthy man has raised all he can to back some scoop on 'change. That being so, the idea of debts wasn't far away, but it was all vague surmise. I could see he was nervy, but I put it down to anxiety about some deal." Richard looked at the other thoughtfully. "It's not your province to answer questions, I know, but I suppose there's no doubt about these... allegations? Isn't it possible that Basil was a fool, rather than a scoundrel?"

"You'll hear all the evidence in due course, sir. I'm sorry, but I don't think there was any chance of a warrant being made for his arrest unless the charges were well grounded. Besides, he must have known that himself to take the course he did."

"Oh, hell! I suppose he did," said Richard wearily, "What you call a real stink, eh?"

And Long did not contradict him.

CHAPTER FIVE

“THERE seem to be certain features which need elucidating, said the Assistant Commissioner pensively. “Inspector Long sent in a very able report – incidentally he is in charge of the Mile End Road case at the moment – and the jury’s verdict at Wulfstane was unanimous, but the Chief Constable of Sendover feels that further investigation is indicated, Macdonald – an opinion in which the City division concur.”

It was after the inquest on Basil Mallowood that the Chief Constable had entered into consultation with Scotland Yard concerning a case which he said, “seemed simple at first glance, but had disquieting implications.” Colonel Wragley, the Assistant Commissioner, had called Chief Inspector Macdonald in for a consultation.

“It seems an unusually interesting case, sir,” replied Macdonald. “It’s quite possible that the jury were right, and I don’t think that they could have given any other verdict on the evidence presented to them, but the case may be likened to a scorpion. Its sting is in its tail.”

Colonel Wragley chuckled, not because he was amused at the Chief Inspector’s analogy – it seemed to him to be a very apt one – but because one of his colleagues at Scotland Yard had once likened Macdonald to a scorpion. Not altogether fairly perhaps, Wragley had thought, for Macdonald was a very sound man, but he had a habit of being right in the end, which, while it was a very valuable attribute in a detective officer, could also be exceedingly irritating to those who had disagreed with him on first premises.

“All things considered, I think you had better look into it, Macdonald,” went on Wragley. “Long is doing very useful work in a district which is his own speciality, and I think it’s quite a sound idea to bring a fresh mind to this Wulfstane business. It’s very definitely at a standstill at present, and it ought to be cleared up. You’ll have the advantage of Long’s report at the outset – an

unexpected piece of good fortune in a case like this – and since you can discuss the evidence with him there won't be any waste or overlapping. I'd say he's a reliable man."

"He certainly is," agreed Macdonald. "He's a farseeing one, too. There don't seem to have been many possibilities he didn't check up on, though the results were negative. His evidence and the report he based on it show sound thinking."

Macdonald, unknown to the Assistant Commissioner, had already seen Long and discussed the Wulfstane case with him. Detectives, in common with other experts, do on occasions forgather "after the hooter has gone," as Macdonald said, and discuss points of professional interest. Macdonald had enjoyed the way in which Long had perceived the different possibilities which arose in the matter of Basil Mallowood's death, and had sympathised with him over the manner in which his carefully collected evidence discounted ingenious theories.

Now, at a later stage, evidence had come in which made it clear that there was "some funny stuff somewhere." The first point was that Martin Mallowood had not returned, and that the combined police force of the country had failed to trace him. Wulfstane Manor and its garden and park had been searched by the local police (though Long expressed his own opinion about the difficulty of searching the vast old house in an adequate manner).

The second point was that Basil Mallowood – very shortly before his death – had translated certain securities into currency or negotiable bearer bonds, of which no trace could be found. The careful work of the auditors had been too slow for this evidence to be put in at the inquest; but it seemed overwhelmingly probable that Basil Mallowood, at the time he left London, had been in possession of a large sum of money, and "large," in the cautious language of the auditors, meant a very considerable sum, amounting to over £10,000.

Macdonald went over once again the evidence which Long had collected, with its baffling results. Further inquiries had substantiated that Paul Mallowood had been seen driving away from Wulfstane in his Rolls Royce by a considerable number of persons, that he had left Croydon by plane, reached Lisbon, and changed into a plane for Tunis. From here he had gone by pre-

arranged transport into the interior, and had since been out of touch with the world of radio and other modern communications. Martin Mallowood had been seen in Rolf Spinney, intent with a birdglass, at 11.0 o'clock on the morning of his brother's death. Basil Mallowood had been seen and spoken to by the maid, Ada Brown, more than two hours after Paul had left in his car for Croydon. He had also been seen by Richard Mallowood, and had spoken to Veronica through his bedroom door. Basil had been heard by Ada Brown "galumphing round" up in the playroom at the same time that Martin had been seen in Rolf Spinney and Richard had been seen in the village of Wulfstane. Veronica, alone of the family, could not bring any evidence forward that she had been where she said she had been. Macdonald looked forward to seeing Veronica: Long had quoted Beach's unkind comment about her resembling "something in the Natural History Museum," and had justified it by saying that in spite of her undoubted handsomeness she had put him in mind of "something prehistoric" himself. "I can imagine her playing Druids – human sacrifices and that sort of thing," he said, and Macdonald had replied, "Were there she-Druids? I doubt it."

After some consideration, Macdonald decided to begin his own investigation at the nearest point, namely at the places where Paul and Basil Mallowood had lived and worked in London. Paul had a flat in St. James, and thither went the Scots detective, intent on collecting what information he could concerning the eldest of the Mallowood family. The front door was opened by a manservant in a linen coat, and the smell – or variety of smells – in the entrance lounge of the flat told their own story. The place was in the hands of the painters and decorators. Macdonald produced his official card, and said that he was in charge of the inquiry into Mr. Basil Mallowood's death. The man asked him to come in, apologising civilly for the state the place was in. His master had given orders to Harrods before he left town, and the whole flat was being redecorated. Morrow (the manservant) further explained that he was only staying there until the decorators had finished their work, and then he was going into the country "on board wages" until his master returned to town.

"A very satisfactory arrangement, I should say," said Macdonald sympathetically, and the man nodded.

“Suits me, sir. I’m just encouraging the men to get on with it as fast as they can. Not that it’ll make much odds to me now,” he added rather despondently. “Mr. Mallowood will have to come back home, I expect, with all this shocking business about his brother.”

“Well, it’s not actually incumbent on him to come back,” replied Macdonald conversationally, and Morrow looked round the dismantled lounge with a worried air.

“If you wouldn’t object to stepping into my sitting-room, sir, I can at least offer you a chair,” he said, and Macdonald accepted the invitation cordially. When they were seated in the small back room in the kitchen quarters, Macdonald continued in his pleasant unhurried way:

“You see, your master left the Manor House some hours before his brother’s death, so his evidence could have added nothing to what was already known. Also, in some cases, a man might be glad to avoid the notoriety attaching to a case of this kind. I can imagine it would be very galling to Mr. Paul Mallowood to hear the case discussed in the city. It’s a deplorable business.”

“So I gather, sir. He must have been a real bad hat, that Mr. Basil. Been on the make for years it seems. Still, his own brother. You’d think... well, sir, if you’ll believe me, I never so much as knew he’d got a brother in London, the master that is. Five years I’ve been here, and never heard of a brother till I saw the papers on Thursday.”

“It looks as though your master were a very reticent man, kept his own counsel,” observed Macdonald, and Morrow nodded.

“He was that, sir, and then some.”

“What I really came for was to inquire if you’d had any message from your master, or if he had sent you any further address,” went on Macdonald, and Morrow replied:

“I had a cable from Lisbon, sir, telling me to redirect any personal letters to his bankers in Cairo. Nothing else. I take it he’d left Tunis and gone off into the wilds, same as he meant, before any news about his brother reached him.”

“So it seems,” agreed Macdonald, “and it may be some time before we get into touch with him.” He got up, adding, “I suppose that all the silver and other valuables were sent to the bank before your master left.”

The other nodded, with a quickly repressed grin.

“Yes, sir. Mr. Mallowood was what you’d call a very careful gentleman. He had all the silver, and his own private papers, taken away and put in a Safe Depository. There’s not much left here, barring the furniture and some of his clothes. There’s the safe, of course – but I don’t think he left much in that, either. Had a great clear out before he went. Between you and me, he was a very suspicious gentleman. Always afraid of any one seeing any of his private papers.”

Macdonald looked at him inquiringly: “It doesn’t sound as though he were the easiest of masters,” he observed, and Morrow replied:

“I’ve known worse, sir. He pays well, he knows what he wants and sticks to it without chopping and changing, he’s punctual and reasonable within reason. I’ve got a good job here and I know it.”

“Sensible man,” said Macdonald. “Well, if you get any further message from Mr. Mallowood, let me know immediately.”

“I will, sir,” replied Morrow. “I reckon I shall be here best part of a month before all this work’s through.”

As Macdonald passed through the entrance lounge again, he glanced through the open doors of the various rooms. All of them were dismantled and shrouded in dust sheets, the furniture being pushed to the centre of the room, pictures taken down, and in three of the rooms, one being the bedroom, the painters were already busy on walls and paintwork. In fact, the whole luxurious suite of rooms offered no point of interest to a detective at all. Macdonald felt that there were quite a number of questions he could have asked Morrow, but decided that it would be wiser to postpone them to a later date. Since he was also pretty certain that Morrow had a large number of questions which he, in his turn, would like to ask, Macdonald felt pretty certain of a welcome on the next occasion he chose to call.

Leaving St. James’, the Chief Inspector made his way to the city, where Paul Mallowood’s offices were situated. He was a director of several companies, but his main income was derived from an import business concerned principally in wood pulp. Macdonald felt himself on rather difficult ground here. At the coroner’s inquest, the jury had been satisfied that there was abundant motive for Basil Mallowood’s suicide, and the evidence proved

so clearly that he had died by his own hand that it had not seemed necessary to adjourn proceedings until Paul Mallowood could be brought back to England. In fact, as Long said, it was such a blatantly obvious case that it became more difficult every time you thought about it. Macdonald had thus no obvious grounds for making inquiries about Paul Mallowood, and he had to trust to his own discretion to make contact with the latter's business associates. He sent up his card to Mr. Bernard Lathom, Paul's fellow director, and was eventually shown in to the latter's office. Lathom was a man of about 60 years of age, thin, grey, harsh faced, with marble-like grey eyes which were steady and absolutely expressionless. Macdonald was careful to avoid giving too great weight to first impressions, but his immediate reaction to Lathom was one of dislike, despite the even courtesy with which the man received him. Sitting opposite the financier, in an office whose furnishings showed good taste as well as wealth, Macdonald explained that he was in charge of further inquiries into the death of Mr. Basil Mallowood.

Lathom replied, "Indeed. I gathered that the jury's verdict was unanimous."

"Certainly, but further points have arisen which the Commissioner considers should be investigated," replied Macdonald, "and I thought it possible that Mr. Paul Mallowood might be able to throw some light on them."

"I think it improbable that your opinion is correct in that matter," replied Lathom. "I have no knowledge at all of Basil Mallowood at first hand – fortunately for me, perhaps – but I do know that his brother has had no dealings with him for many years. I once mentioned Basil Mallowood to his brother in connection with a possible directorate in a subsidiary firm, and the reply was very definite. Neither in the way of business nor of social life did the two brothers have any contact with one another."

"Then you think it quite improbable that Mr. Paul Mallowood would have any letters from his brother among his files?" queried Macdonald, and the other replied:

"Most improbable. If the matter is of any interest to you I do not mind telling you in strict confidence that Mr. Paul Mallowood's interest in this firm has been mainly academic, shall I say, for some weeks past. He had been thinking of retiring for some time. The technical side of the matter involved a

considerable transfer of shares, of course, and the retirement does not become operative until after our annual meeting. In point of fact, Mr. Mallowood removed all his personal effects from this office before he went abroad, so even though I went to the extreme length of allowing you access to his papers in his absence, which, quite frankly, I should not contemplate doing, you would find nothing pertaining to him personally.”

“Thank you very much for giving me the information,” said Macdonald, and the other replied:

“You will see my point when I say that I believe I am following the wisest course in telling you the facts. As a police officer of high standing you will, of course, respect the confidential nature of what I have told you. Frankly, we are in an unpleasant position, Inspector. Of the probity of Mr. Paul Mallowood there can be no doubts. He has our highest respect and our fullest confidence, and it is due to his acumen and integrity that our firm stands where it does. Nevertheless, it is obvious that the name Mallowood is in bad odour to-day. The last thing we want here is any rumour concerning the impending retirement of Mr. Paul Mallowood. Uninformed or previous reports on the matter could do us an infinitude of harm.”

Macdonald nodded. “Yes. I understand that well enough, but you can see for yourself that it is desirable for the police to have early information as to his movements. I have no doubt you are anxious on the same score yourself.”

The other shook his head. “As matters stand now, his presence here is immaterial. If necessary, an extraordinary meeting could be convened to put the facts before our shareholders. I regret, of course, that Mr. Paul Mallowood’s retirement was not made public before he left England, but the state of the market made such a course impolitic.”

Macdonald left the office pretty clear in his own mind as to Mr. Latham’s concern about his fellow-director’s retirement. Lathom had doubtless acquired for himself the block of shares which had given Paul Mallowood his standing as chief director, and Lathom was concerned lest the scandal of Basil Mallowood’s transactions should send his own shares falling pell-mell down the slippery slope of loss of confidence. If Lathom announced Paul Mallowood’s retirement precipitately, that announcement might have an undesired effect on the price of shares. It was a difficult situation for him.

Leaving Mr. Lathom and his preoccupations out of the matter, Macdonald found much food for thought in this latest development of the Mallowood case. It seemed to him more than a little odd that Paul should have retired and gone abroad at the very moment that Basil's misdealings should have been unmasked. To ask Mr. Lathom for further direct information at this stage would be useless in Macdonald's opinion, but he wondered whether an extensive audit had not been set on foot regarding Paul Mallowood's dealings in his own firm. Mr. Lathom did not look the type to omit such a precaution, despite his affirmation of confidence in his fellow-director.

From the city Macdonald made his way westwards again. Inquiries had already been set on foot at Basil's chambers, and Macdonald knew what he would find there, but he went to get an impression at first hand. Basil had lived in a house just off Manchester Square, the house being run as a combination of hotel and men's chambers, the proprietor being an ex-hotelier from Switzerland, recently naturalised. There was a general lounge and dining-room in the house, and a number of rooms were let as bedrooms only. In addition were certain suites, including bedroom, sitting-room and bathroom, with service provided. The whole place was admirably furnished – lighting, heating and plumbing being of the most up-to-date, and the furnishing of the most luxurious variety. The proprietor, who now styled himself Mr. John Dubois, looked at Macdonald with patient resignation when he announced his business, and replied:

"I am at your service, Inspector, but anything I tell you can but be a repetition of what I have already said. Mr. Mallowood's rooms are still locked and sealed. You can examine them for yourself."

Macdonald nodded, and replied, "Yes, but it occurred to me that if I had a talk with you, Mr. Dubois, you might be able to help me more than you yourself think possible. Shall we go upstairs together to Mr. Mallowood's rooms, and I can then ask you anything which occurs to me on the spot?"

"As you will, Inspector," said Dubois, with a shrug, "but I think it probable that we shall but waste our time."

The proprietor preceded Macdonald to the lift, and while they ascended, the C.I.D. man studied his companion at close quarters. Dubois was taller than most Swiss, and very fair, his sleek hair brushed back over a head as round as a

bullet. His eyes were grey blue, his chin square and somewhat aggressive, his neck short and shoulders very broad and powerful. He was an unusual type of man, and one with whom Macdonald felt on his guard.

Basil Mallowood's chambers were in effect a self-contained flat. A front door opened into a small lounge, from which doors gave in turn on to a fine spacious sitting-room, whose ceiling and fireplace, overmantel and mouldings, were unspoiled work of the Adam's period. The bedroom was smaller, with a bathroom opening from it, and the room which had been converted into the entrance lounge had been subdivided to make space for a kitchenette and further lavatory accommodation. Macdonald, after a brief inspection of the rooms, turned to Dubois.

"This flat, I gather, was let furnished?"

"Yes, that is so."

"Is there anything here which was Mr. Mallowood's private property?"

"Apart from the clothes in the wardrobe, nothing."

"How long had Mr. Mallowood lived here?"

"For four years, since I first advertised the chambers after reconditioning the house."

Macdonald studied the other closely. "For four years a wealthy man has made this place his home, and yet there is nothing here which is his personal property, barring a few suits of clothes?"

Dubois met his eyes squarely. "The phrase 'has made this place his home' is of your choosing, Inspector, not mine. To put the matter more accurately, I should have said that Mr. Mallowood has been a tenant here since four years."

"I see. It can be assumed that he had another home, elsewhere."

"I do not make assumptions about my tenants, Inspector. I can tell you that Mr. Mallowood was a good tenant. He paid his accounts promptly, he was generous to the servants, he gave no cause for complaint to other tenants. He entertained here occasionally, he had a certain amount of correspondence addressed here, he spent a certain amount of his time here, but he was frequently away – sometimes for long periods, sometimes for short."

"It is a matter of great importance to me to learn where he spent those periods, Mr. Dubois."

"There I cannot help you, Inspector. Mr. Mallowood was of a type the

most secretive. He had his own private line put in to this flat, so that his phone calls should not go through the switchboard in the office. He had a patent lock on his letter box. He never left a sheet of paper nor an envelope on his desk. He locked all his drawers. You can ask the man who valeted him. Servants notice these things. You may well say 'These rooms were let furnished.' I have never had a tenant like him. No photographs, no books, no pictures, no small personal properties such as men collect. His rooms always looked just as you see them now. Furnished rooms, handsome, you will admit, but the furnishing was my choice, not his."

"Was he in the habit of taking a suitcase with him when he went away?"

Dubois shrugged his shoulders. "On rare occasions I believe he did so, but we had no reason to observe his comings and goings. He came and went at his pleasure. There was no need for him to inform us. He had his meals in the restaurant as a rule. His apartment was cleaned by contract with my service staff. Sometimes he was here, sometimes he was away. If he wanted the valet or the porter, he used the house telephone."

"What proportion of his time would you say he spent here? Was he away for half the time, roughly speaking, or less?"

Again Dubois shrugged. "About that, Inspector. He was generally away for week-ends – Fridays until Monday or Tuesday. Not always, but frequently."

Again Macdonald pondered. Then he said:

"When a police search was first made here, the drawers of that writing bureau were empty, save for unused stationery. The telephone directories were new and unused. There were none of the usual books of reference – railway time-tables, directories, maps – the inevitable belongings of any man who lives in town. Surely Mr. Mailowood must have had some such properties?"

"Doubtless he had, Inspector, though I think I am right in saying that he never left anything about. I have the right to inspect these apartments, to see that the cleaning is properly done and the appointments are in order. During the first months that Mr. Mailowood was my tenant here, I was exercised in my mind about him."

He paused, and Macdonald asked bluntly:

"Why?"

Dubois spread out his hands in a puzzled way, his shoulders hunched up,

as he replied:

“Did you not observe that it was strange that a man of the world, wealthy, of mature years, should live thus in appartements meublées, with no personal belongings about him, no photographs, no books? I thought so, too, Inspector. I said to myself, ‘This is like the apartment of a man who is always prepared to depart at short notice; to vanish, to filer a l’Anglaise, décamper.’ ”

“Do a bolt, in short,” said Macdonald, and Dubois nodded thoughtfully.

“Exactly, Inspector, and yet for four years this man has not – done a bolt – and when the occasion comes about when he might have been expected to do so, when he appeared to have made every arrangement for doing so, then he blows his brains out. It is lacking in logic.”

The last sentence came in an outburst of rapid stacato speech, the foreign accent growing more accentuated as the tempo quickened.

“I quite agree with you,” said Macdonald. “It appears very illogical, and it is for that reason that further investigation is desirable. Now I think it improbable that Mr. Mallowood lived here for four years without having any personal possessions about him. He took a suitcase with him to his old home at Wulfstane, but only a small case, such as a man might use for a week-end visit. I take it that he would have come in and packed that on the Tuesday when he went to Wulfstane in response to his brother’s telephone message.”

“If so, nobody saw him enter or leave this house,” replied Dubois. “There is a porter on duty in the hall. He did not see him. I did not see him. Nobody in this house saw Mr. Mallowood since Friday morning. It is true that he took a suitcase with him then, but it was a large case, and heavy. He carried it himself from the lift to his car.”

“And in that case were doubtless packed the various trifles which I might have expected to find here,” said Macdonald. Dubois rubbed his chin. “That one, he changed his mind,” he said. “He knew that retribution was at hand: he made all his arrangements for removing himself to safety, having made it very difficult for the police to get on his trail, hein? and then he blew his brains out... There is without doubt something strange here... A woman, one might guess?”

“One might,” agreed Macdonald dryly, “one might even hazard several women. I should be glad if you would think over this matter very carefully, Mr.

Dubois. Somewhere in London – or not very far from London, there is another establishment where traces of Mr. Basil Mallowood could be found. It is possible that in some unguarded moment he let out a phrase which might give a clue to his other quarters. If anything occurs to you, I should be glad if you will let me know. I will call on you again later.”

“As you will, Inspector. I would gladly help you were it in my power, but I can assure you of this. It would be more in character for an oyster to open of itself and to offer you a pearl than for Mr. Mallowood to drop information concerning himself. He was a silent one.”

As Macdonald left the house he mused over the fact, that Paul and Basil Mallowood had at least one characteristic in common – their secretiveness. It was also an indisputable fact that if Mr. John Dubois had had any motive to remove all traces of his late tenant from that furnished site, he had had abundant opportunities for so doing.

Macdonald pondered over the phrase: “That one, he changed his mind...”

It was all a very queer business.

CHAPTER SIX

IT was on Monday, October 15th, that Macdonald set out on his way to Wulfstane, driving by way of the Kingston by-pass, and following the Portsmouth road as far as Liss, where he turned off the main road, and proceeded leisurely by narrow roads shaded by the rich gold of autumn woodland. It was a year prolific in fruits of all kinds. The hedgerows were gay with trails of bryony berries, their enamelled scarlet shining in twines around bramble and thorn. Rose hips, crimson haws, scarlet fruits of the wayfaring tree, spindle berry, spikes of lords and ladies, blue-black of privet and whiteness of wild clematis – Macdonald caught glimpses of them all as he drove slowly through narrow lanes, in a country where chalk and gravel alternated as subsoil, so that the woodland varied from beech and ash and yew to clumps of dark conifer, golden larch and patches of birch, the latter turned to their autumn splendour in which the leaves were primrose yellow against the slender silver branches.

By the time he had left the main road far behind and was approaching the village of Wulfdean, Macdonald had taken a strong liking to the countryside in which it lay. It was what he called “honest country,” being innocent alike of bungalow, council house or modern mansion of the wealthy.

The fields, some still in stubble, some already ploughed, curved magnificently over the underlying chalk. The cottages were a mixture of split flint walls and well-mellowed brick, the churches had little extinguisher spires of weathered shingle – ancient comfortable buildings whose materials were derived from their surrounding countryside without importation of alien stuff. The village of Wulfdean was as consistent as the other hamlets through which he passed. A good village green, part of it mown to serve as cricket pitch in summer, was surrounded by flint cottages, a rambling old inn, a Norman church with a tiny apse, and a fine stone vicarage, whose walls were of the

chalky stone which fares so ill in cities and survives well in the open country, the rough stone and mortar interspersed in places with additions of split flint.

Macdonald left his car in the open yard of the inn, sampled the local beer, and set out on foot to the manor. He found a small gate in the enclosing wall, and followed a path which led him through a belt of woodland. Here the beeches were clad in sheer magnificence of flaming gold, and at length, through a clearing, Macdonald saw the Manor House, pale and stately on a rise some few hundred yards away, with the open parkland bathed in sunshine below it. Macdonald liked old houses, and he had a natural sense of proportion which responded to an architectural achievement. He stood still in the shadow of the beeches and considered the building before him. The south front of Wulfstane was Jacobean in period, its detail showing the native genius of English architecture which absorbed the classic of the Renaissance and adapted it to fit in with the traditional gothic of the gabled medieval manor. There were gables on the south front of Wulfstane, but their abrupt angles were masked by an Italianate balustrade which threw a strong horizontal line across the south front. The great entrance door had a flattened perpendicular arch above it, and the windows were mullioned. The east wing, at right angles to the main front, was of earlier date, its Elizabethan windows smaller, its rooms obviously lower and less spacious than those of the main block. The whole building, mellowed by time, unspoilt by later additions, was unforgettably beautiful, and Macdonald forgot his own job for a while and stared fascinated at the gracious stone pile, serene in the pale October sunlight.

He was still staring when he heard a footfall on the carpet of beech leaves to his right, and he turned and came face to face with Veronica Mallowood. He had no doubt about her identity at all: her height and bearing were so unusual, her presence so arrogant, that something in Macdonald stiffened, and he straightened himself, chin well up, as she approached, gun under her arm, striding through the sun-dappled glade. She addressed him in her calm deep voice when she was still a few yards distant.

“You must surely know that you are trespassing here?”

“I was walking up to the house, and took what seemed to be a short-cut,” he replied, and then, following an impulse, expressed the thought in his mind. “I had heard about Wulfstane, but the reality came as a surprise. It is rarely

beautiful.”

Veronica’s harsh face softened, and she turned and looked up at her home, her eyes dwelling on it with serene satisfaction. When she turned to him again, Macdonald proffered a card, saying:

“I am sorry that I have to break in on the peace of your home, Miss Mallowood. I have been put in charge of the case concerning your late brother.”

A frown drove the serenity from her face, and she surveyed Macdonald with a look of angry distaste, not unmixed with surprise. The detective, in tweed coat and flannel trousers, bareheaded, his lean face well tanned with the weather, looked not at all the type usually associated with the police. Dark-headed, grey-eyed, assured of bearing and quiet of voice, Macdonald came as a surprise to Veronica Mallowood, who had a tendency to believe that she could place any man at a glance. She met his eyes resentfully.

“Because my brother was a swindler who chose a coward’s way out, it seems that my home is to have peace no longer, Chief Inspector. What do you imagine that you can do which will make a disgraceful episode less degrading? Have we not had trouble enough in our home, without being reminded of it afresh?”

“I realise that you have been subjected to great distress, and that you must be living under a burden of anxiety,” replied Macdonald quietly, “but in one respect I may be able to help you. You must be worried over your younger brother, Martin.”

She gave an exasperated shrug of her shoulders, a movement which Macdonald interpreted as a nervous reflex, indicative of mental tension.

“Shall we go on up to the house?” she inquired. “Since you have come down from London to ask questions – and I tell you frankly I am so sick of questions I have hardly the patience to answer any more – we might as well go indoors and get the farce over. Nothing that I can tell you will alter what has happened.”

She swung on ahead of him up the path towards the parkland, and Macdonald followed, noting the easy swing of her long limbs, and the pace at which she covered the ground. Just as verbal descriptions had given him no adequate idea of the beauty of Wulfstane, so descriptions of Veronica

Mallowood had given him no idea of her curious impressiveness. Macdonald, who had an analytical mind, was quick to assess the one important point that here was a woman who had just missed being beautiful. In missing it, she had a quality that was not far removed from the fantastic, but she also impressed Macdonald with her strength. Her physical strength was obvious in the way she moved over rough steep ground, but in that set deliberate face, strong jaw, and steady eyes, he recognised another sort of strength – something of the power of the fanatic. He spoke to her again when the path widened as they left the beech trees and came out on to the open parkland.

“I like the way the Jacobean builders worked on two opposing styles and achieved a new one for themselves,” he said. “You get something of the same kind in some of the collegiate buildings at Cambridge.”

She turned and stared at him. “Is English domestic architecture a branch of detection?” she asked scornfully, and Macdonald replied:

“Not to my knowledge, but a detective is not debarred from enjoying man’s common heritage. We have our personal interests, as other men do. I enjoy buildings, and I don’t often get the chance of seeing anything so interesting as this house of yours. It must have seen a lot of English history in the making.”

“It must also have seen many crimes of varying natures,” she replied. “Like so many old houses, it has had varying functions, from a fortified holding of Plantagenet days, through a period when it housed a religious community. Then, at the Reformation, it was turned into a dwelling-house again, rebuilt in Elizabeth’s day, partially rebuilt again in Charles I.’s, and improved upon in Charles II.’s. We owe some of our later panelling to Queen Anne; since then it has been left untouched so far as its main fabric is concerned.”

She turned and looked at him, a half smile in her dark eyes. “What a pity that your visit here is not dictated by your pleasure in architecture, Inspector. Wulfstane itself is a vastly more profitable subject for research than the death of one of its ignoble sons.” She laughed, a short harsh laugh which Macdonald pondered over. “The Mallowoods have produced a diversity of scoundrels in their many generations,” she went on calmly. “Their villainies are hardly worthy of the attentions of a historical research worker – but the house remains. An object lesson in values, Chief Inspector. I commend you to a

study of the house.”

“Wherein I should be well repaid,” replied Macdonald. They had crossed the pasture of the parkland, and Veronica led on through a gate to a bridge which crossed a deep ditch, and then up a short flight of moss-covered stone steps which gave on to the formal garden, whose lawns rose in a series of terraces connected by steps which were edged by low stone balustrades similar in design to those along the south front. While he enjoyed the beauty of the design, Macdonald also observed the state of neglect into which lawns and stonework and borders had fallen. The grass paths were hardly distinguishable from the moss-grown steps: the noble ironwork of the low gates which closed some of the shallow flights was in a woeful state, gates hanging on broken hinges, mosses and lichens thick on the ornament of stone pillars. Macdonald remembered Paul Mallowood’s opulent flat in St. James’, and wondered to himself. Wulfstane had fallen on sorry times, it seemed, its family divided against itself.

Again he addressed Veronica solely on the subject of Wulfstane.

“I take it we have crossed your one-time moat, and that these terraces were levelled on the outworks of the ancient defences?”

She nodded. “Roughly speaking, yes. The house has always served as its own stone quarry, successive builders reframing the original material. You can’t dig deep in these borders. You come on remains of vaulted cellars.”

The last rise gave on to the spacious lawns all round the house, a wide area of level turf, with borders in which chrysanthemums and michaelmas daisies glowed in gay masses of colour, though weeds choked the less vigorous plants, and bindweed and traveller’s joy rioted unchecked over once fine shrubs.

“The morning-room seems to have been adapted as the inquisition parlour,” said Veronica. “Shall we go straight in there?”

She led the way to the garden door which stood open to the lawns – all the doors of the Manor House were open, Macdonald noted. Putting down her gun, she nodded brusquely, indicating a chair, and said:

“Now what on earth is it that you want to know that has not been told already?”

Macdonald stood by the window, facing her, and did not answer at once. He wondered by what method he could best get in touch with her mind, and

gain some access to her confidence, assuming that she had nothing to hide. It was that last proviso which gave him an idea of how to tackle his problem, and at last he said:

“I am in a difficulty which I think you can understand for yourself, Miss Mallowood. On the one hand, I am presented with a case which seems straightforward. A man has shot himself in order to escape the penalty of the law on his own misdemeanours. Can you say, in all honesty, that that statement covers the situation here? Is there not something further to be investigated?”

He waited for her to answer, studying her frowning face, and at length she said:

“In saying that a man has shot himself, you state the reason for a police inquiry. The jury were satisfied that he did shoot himself – it was obvious enough, heaven knows! – and that he had reason for shooting himself. Why worry the question as a terrier worries a dead rat?”

“You have not answered my question,” replied Macdonald. “I asked ‘Is there not something else?’ Why, because one of your brothers shot himself, should two other brothers disappear?”

“Two? You mean Paul. I can’t answer for him, but I fail to see that his journey and Basil’s death could be connected. Paul had arranged his journey long since. He had deliberately arranged his affairs, so he said, that he could go away without troubling his mind about letters or cables. He meant to go away for some months, deliberately cutting himself off from his usual preoccupations. If you are arguing a certain prescience in his action, I think you are mistaken. He knew nothing of Basil’s affairs, and cared less. Paul is a very self-contained person.”

“Very well. I accept it as a fact that you are satisfied with that explanation. But about your other brother, Martin? You are satisfied about his absence, too?”

A deeper frown cleft Veronica’s brow, and her troubled eyes glowed under their knitted brows:

“If you mean do I understand his absence, I can reply that I do,” she rejoined. “Perhaps you, who are not devoid of imagination seemingly, can understand that it is hateful to have our intimate affairs pried into. Martin has always been different from other people. He had infantile paralyses when he

was young, and he has always been liable to do unexpected things. This is not the first time he has been away without explanation. On several different occasions he has walked out of the house and not come back for days. I don't know if it was loss of memory, or some nervous instability which made him go, but he never has given any explanation of why he goes or where he goes, and I have learnt not to ask. I know that he comes back – often exhausted, unaware, apparently, of the fact that he has been away for so long. If it had not happened before I should be worried about him – but I have given up worrying. It's just Martin. He will come back some time.”

“On the other occasions when he went away, did you inform the police, or have any search made for him?”

“The first time it happened was years ago, when our father was alive. There had been some trouble, my father was notoriously short-tempered, and Martin was away for days. The police were told then, and the keepers made a search of the estate, but nobody found him. He just came back, bewildered and exhausted, quite unable to answer any questions. When I asked him where he had been, he simply said that he did not know – and I think he spoke the truth. On later occasions I did not ask questions. It only worried him.”

She talked in abrupt nervous phrases; her eyes staring out of the window, her hands clasped round her knees as she sat on the edge of the table. There was something moving in the simplicity of her narrative, and Macdonald was hard put to it to make up in his mind whether to believe in her explanation or not. There was some baffling quality about her which made her very difficult to assess.

“Have you ever consulted a doctor about this habit of his?” he inquired, and she shook her head.

“No. What was the use? It's obvious enough that Martin has nervous fits which make him strange at times. He's all right when we're left in peace and nobody worries us.”

“Ah, then you connect his absences with periods of worry and disturbance?”

Veronica got to her feet and began to pace up and down the room, her hands in her pockets.

“If I told you my own explanation of his wandering fits, you would tell me

that I was quite irrational,” she said, and Macdonald replied:

“Should I? I’m a Scot, you know. We have patches of irrationality in our make-up. I should be glad if you would tell me.”

She stared at him: “You are a very odd policeman,” she rejoined abruptly. “Old houses and old families have a tendency to be abnormal, but such abnormality isn’t of interest to the matter of fact. Martin has always gone away when something was going to happen here, when somebody was going to die, or a row was going to occur, or the ghost was going to be seen. He has a queer phrase about ‘remembering the future.’ He went away before our father died, and when our old nurse died. Now can you understand why I’m not surprised that he went away when Basil shot himself? – or are you going to tell me that I am talking nonsense?”

“I’m very much interested in what you say, though I don’t think it need of necessity involve an abnormal explanation,” he replied. “A man of your brother’s type, with a sensitive nervous mind, can be apprehensive of trouble subconsciously. The psychologists would understand that well enough. A subconscious fear may drive a person away from home, and may cause actual fits of forgetfulness. Most deaths are prefaced by illness, most quarrels by previous disagreement. There’s nothing irrational in that. Even in this case, though your brother’s suicide was presumably unpredictable, there may well have been some unrest and discord in the family meeting which preceded it.”

She laughed, again that short harsh laugh which was so lacking in mirth.

“A very good analysis, Chief Inspector. Family concord is not our long suit. My older brothers – with the exception of Richard – were both pretty loathsome to Martin. They despised him. On one occasion last Wednesday – when we were all at tea together – the word lunatic was mentioned. It’s a word which terrifies Martin. He’s always had a fear that his mind would go. I think if there is any rational explanation of his disappearance this time, it was the use of that one word. He was morbid over it.”

“When you last saw your brother Martin, on your walk that Wednesday morning, did he say anything to you which made you realise that he was upset?”

“No, but he never says anything to give one an idea that he’s going to have one of his wandering fits. He did say that he was going to stay out of doors

until the others – Basil and Richard – went away. He said he'd had enough family to last him for a long time. I rather sympathised. We – Martin and I – prefer this place to ourselves."

Macdonald nodded. "Yes. Family gatherings are not always occasions of joy," he said. "There is one other point which I want to deal with now, Miss Mallowood, before I ask your permission to go upstairs and see the old playroom and your brothers' bedrooms. When you left the top floor on Wednesday, immediately after the door had been broken in, exactly what did you do and where did you go?"

"I did exactly what I was told to do," she replied. "I went to the telephone, which is in the cloakroom at the back of the hall, and put a call through to the police station at Sendover. Having done that, I went and told Ada and cook not to make fools of themselves. After that I came in here and Richard came down a moment later."

"Did Inspector Long tell you that the officer on duty at the front door saw a man whom he took to be your brother Martin crossing the lawns and coming towards the house?"

Veronica's brows lifted scornfully. "He told me so, yes. Since the officer in question had never seen Martin I didn't take his evidence very seriously. We do get odd people wandering across the grounds occasionally. The average sightseer has very little idea of respecting private property. If what you want to know is 'did I see Martin crossing the lawn?' the answer is 'I did not.' "

At that moment the door opened, and a tall man came in and looked at Macdonald inquiringly. The latter was immediately struck by the newcomer's remarkable likeness to Veronica, even the manner of holding their heads and the position of their hands was similar. Veronica performed a curt introduction.

"Chief Inspector Macdonald. My brother, Richard Mallowood."

Even as he gave his slight formal bow Richard Mallowood's eyebrows shot up, and his lips pursed to a whistle:

"Poor old Basil!" he said softly. "Is that still the subject of inquiry, inquest ad infinitum? – after he tried so hard to make matters clear in his last letter, too."

Veronica turned and picked up her gun, saying:

“The Inspector wants to see the playroom, and the rest of the house, Richard. You can take him round. I’ll go and see if there’s any food going.” She glanced back at Macdonald. “My brother will bring you to the dining-room if you would like lunch here, Inspector.”

Without waiting for an answer she walked out of the room, and Richard gave a quiet chuckle.

“I don’t suppose domestic problems enter your scheme of things,” he said, regarding Macdonald with his bright humorous stare. “The servants left yesterday – with the permission of the police, of course. No others have applied for the situation. Thank God for tin openers. Would you like to do an extensive tour of this historic mansion, Inspector, or give the once over to exhibits A and B, namely, the playroom and Basil’s bedroom? I am at your service.”

“I should like to see all over the house, and I should be grateful for your guidance,” said Macdonald, “but if this is an inconvenient time for you, I could wander round by myself, and ask questions afterwards.”

Richard turned to the door, saying, “If I were ill-disposed towards the law and its representatives, I should take you at your word; left to your own devices it’s probable that you would break your neck. If you tell me there is a house in England which has more dangerous stairs in more unexpected places, with more low beams to crack your skull on, or more treacherous floors to trip over, I don’t believe you. Shall we go to the top floor first and work our way downwards?”

“If you could give me a general idea of the lay-out first it would be helpful,” said Macdonald. “It is a complex building and not easy to grasp.”

“It certainly isn’t. The architects were more concerned with their outside elevations than interior convenience,” replied Richard. “I’ll do you a rough plan before we start, if you like.”

He sat down at the table, pulled a long envelope out of his pocket, and started sketching, quickly and neatly, while Macdonald watched him.

“Main block, ground floor,” he said. “Period James I and Charles I. South front, entrance hall in centre – you probably saw the front door as you came in. Entering by that, staircase in front of you, drawing-room door on left, dining-room door on right: entrance to gun-room at the back by left of stairs –

so. The gun-room gives on to a lobby, with cloakroom, and from lobby is the entrance to the morning-room, where we are now – got that? Following the usual tricks of old houses, morning-room also opens into drawing-room on one side and blue boudoir – seldom used – on the other. You can do a circular tour, or play hide and seek, via drawing-room, morning-room, gun-room and entrance hall, all having more than one entrance. I used to find that useful in my errant youth. You can't run a chap to earth when there's a choice of exits."

"Quite. Each room can be regarded as a passage as well as a room."

"That's the idea – the same throughout. As you were, in the entrance hall again. On the side opposite to the drawing-room is the dining-room – and a damned big cold impossible room it is too, forty-five by thirty feet and only one fireplace. At the back of the dining-room, on the north side are passages to the kitchens which are in the east wing. The latter is nearly all Elizabethan. Dining-room leads into library: from the library you turn right into the gallery, the beginning of the L shaped wing which juts out southward. The rest of that wing on the ground floor is disused now. The rooms are damp and miserable and the windows are too small. Picturesque, but damned uncomfortable. The kitchens jut out northwards, behind the library – pantries, dairy, wash-houses and God knows what else – a labyrinth of stone-floored abominations. There you are, that's the ground plan roughly."

"I see, that's excellent," said Macdonald. "You're fairly expert at plans."

Richard snorted. "Expert? Not I. I know the house: I ought to. I was brought up in it, and I can draw maps. Now for the first floor. The same general outline, but for your purpose you can disregard the rooms in the Elizabethan wing. They're not used now. No electric light, no drainage, all rat-eaten and dry-rotted. Going up the main stairs you find a passage running the full length of the north side of the house. Turn to your left at the top of the stairs and the first room is my sister's, a huge room. Next come a dressing-room and a bathroom, then the room my brother Paul had, at the corner of the wing. To the north of that is another bedroom called the oriel room – unused. Turning to your right at the top of the staircase you come first to a guest-room where Mrs. Lorne slept, then Martin's bedroom, then a bathroom. At the east end of the wing come two other bedrooms, Basil's and mine – his on the south, mine on the east side. Two more unused rooms over the

kitchens, and servants quarters with their own staircase. I don't know this bit accurately – it's what you'd call an architect's nightmare. I know there used to be another staircase connecting it with the top floor, but that's been blocked up years since. As for the top floor, most of the rooms are empty. They used to be nurseries and so forth in the old days when big families were the vogue. Our old playroom has been left with most of its original furniture in it though – too much knocked about to be sellable, I expect.” He was drawing a plan of the top floor as he spoke, and pushed it towards Macdonald. “There you are. The staircase up to the top floor is in the angle of the west and south sides – outside Paul's room, immediately above the lobby between the gun-room and here. There's the same corridor on the north side which you find below, and half a dozen rooms facing south. The playroom is at the corner of the east wing and stretches above the bedrooms Basil and I occupied. It used to have a doorway to the Elizabethan parts but that has been blocked up. The stairway and floorboards were all rotten. Well, how much have you grasped from all these scribbles?”

“I've got the main idea, I fancy,” replied Macdonald. “In this side of the house, westwards from the entrance hall, are the drawing-room to the south, gun-room on the north, morning-room and boudoir on the west side, with a connecting lobby between gun-room and morning-room – whence go stairs, I take it, connecting with the small flight above leading to the top floor? In all there are three staircases: the main one which leads to the first floor only; a service staircase from the kitchens to the first floor, the upper flight to the top floor being now blocked, and the staircase between the gun-room and the morning-room at the west end of the building which goes from ground floor to top storey?”

“That's right.”

“I take it there may be other stairways – in the Elizabethan wing, for example?”

“Several of them, but as that wing is shut off now, they're not used.”

“Right – and now if you'll take me round I shall be much indebted to you.”

“I'll take you round with pleasure – but what all this has to do with the why and wherefore of Basil's shooting himself beats me altogether,” replied Richard.

Macdonald considered a moment before he replied, and then said:

“The evidence shows that a man was seen in the garden outside this room a few minutes after your brother shot himself. His presence may have been germane to the case, and it’s just possible that some trace of him may still exist, if he entered the house. It’s a point which must be considered.”

Richard sighed. “All right. Let’s get on with it. You’ll soon see there wasn’t much chance for humour on the part of your mysterious stranger. My God! How I do hate mystery mongering! I told the other chap – Long, wasn’t it? that I had seen a tall fair-headed cove in the village who asked me if I were Basil. The police down here have traced the chap. He wasn’t a dun, as I imagined, but a bookie from Portsmouth who knew Basil years ago. It was probably he who was seen in the garden.”

“I think not. This man, Lynch by name, was in Petersfield at noon on Wednesday morning.”

“So he says,” retorted Richard. “Doesn’t want to be mixed up with our family to-do. Any way, I’ll bet it wasn’t Martin. If it had been, my sister would have seen him, and she’d have taken care not to let him out of her sight again that morning.” He turned and faced Macdonald impatiently: “For God’s sake don’t get it into your head that Martin was involved in Basil’s suicide. It just doesn’t make sense. Come along and see the room where it happened, and you’ll soon realise there wasn’t much chance of any funny business.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

“MY brothers and I all used this room as a place to riot in: it was a refuge from the rest of the house, where we could make a mess and kick up a row unrebuked,” said Richard Mallowood, as he and Macdonald entered the long battered-looking room where Basil had met his end. Macdonald stood and looked about him. The length of the room ran north and south. There were four casement windows facing east, of which only one was hinged to open. The walls were roughly plastered, but not papered, and there was no plaster ceiling, the great roof beams crossing the room from side to side and laths showing beneath the tiles of the pent roof. An old refectory table stood beneath the windows, and Richard went up to it, pointing with a sunburned finger:

“We’re all recorded there, Paul, Basil, Martin and I,” he said. “Paul was the best at carving as you can see. He did that when he was fifteen – it took him the whole of the summer holidays – persevering bloke he always was.”

Macdonald looked down at the admirably carved inscription on the ancient worm-eaten surface of the table. “Paul Bertrand de Lisle Mallowood,” it ran, and close against it was a rough rendering of the Mallowood crest and arms, a scutcheon of bewildering quaterings with a wolf’s head for crest. Further along the table Basil Philip de Lisle Mallowood had inscribed his name in less skilful fashion. Richard Blaise de Lisle Mallowood had contented himself with a mere scratching of his name and a heraldic achievement which resembled a skull and cross bones rather than his family arms. Martin had got no further than his Christian name, and even that was rather illegible, since he had attempted to inscribe it in the complexity of Gothic black letter.

“Enough to give any one the double-distilled hump,” said Richard Mallowood, looking down at the table, and running his finger along the carven capitals of Basil’s name. “He was rather a nice kid once. We used to sit up here

and talk careers. Our youth was rather blighted because the family fortune contracted every year, under the curse of those damned scoundrelly Liberals – how our old pater used to curse them to high heaven.” He sat on the table and lighted a cigarette, looking reflectively round the old room. “A property like this is the devil, when you’ve got a contracting rent-roll, a slump in farming, and ill-chosen investments,” he went on. “The old man was as proud as Lucifer. He was always chronically broke, because he hadn’t the means for keeping this house up, and he squandered money in one direction and was a skinflint in others. It was because we had lack of money drummed into us all our boyhood that Basil and Paul chose city careers. They both swore they’d make money, and then more money. Paul and Basil were both at Reppingham: when they left school, being clever fellas; they managed to scrounge their way in with city wallahs – fathers of moneyed friends – and they kept their noses to that damned money-grindstone all their lives. Paul always meant to restore this place in the grand manner – and then the old man went and left it to Martin and Veronica. Lord, I must be getting on into my dotage, blethering away like this,” he exclaimed, “but the sight of this table brings things back. We’ve sat up here and talked and talked and planned out what thundering fine things we’d do. My God! Look at us now... Basil Philip de Lisle Mallowood, intent on making money by fair means or foul, ending by shooting himself, and leaving a letter on this table with apologies to the rest of us. God! What a mess-up – and I tell you he was a nice kid once... Sorry. I oughtn’t to have came up here. This room’s haunted – not with ghosts, but with frustrated intentions.”

“I can understand your feeling about it well enough,” said Macdonald. He pulled a pipe out of his pocket and filled it as he spoke. “This record;” pointing to the names, “it must be alive to you, and the business about your brother a bitter epilogue. I’m sorry.” He paused, and then went on: “When the others were debating careers and money making, what were your own ideas about it all?”

“Mine? Oh, I always loathed money and talk about money and rows about money. Something revolting in it all. What I liked was to get one of those old travel books from the library downstairs – Hakluyt’s voyages, or the journeys of Marco Polo, or Doughty – even Darwin and Huxley fascinated me because they’d travelled. I did a bolt after my last term at Reppingham, footed it to

Bristol and got taken on as cabin boy. The old man never forgave me – not that I cared. All I've ever wanted to do was to wander. Basil would have done better if he'd followed suit. He was a great hefty fellow, and a very fine athlete once. He and I had some good times together in the long ago."

"I was interested in what you said just now, about you eldest brother, Paul," said Macdonald.. "His ambition was to come and live here again, after he had made enough money to retire?"

"That's it – another frustrated intention. As eldest son he expected to inherit, but this property isn't entailed, and it was left to Martin and Veronica jointly. The fact was our amiable parent hated Paul and Basil for being business men. The silly old ass wanted them to enter the services – even though he hadn't a bean to help them. In the 1914-1918 mess-up, Paul didn't join up until he had to; and even then he spent most of his soldiering in Whitehall – one of the brass-hat snobs – and got out of it by January, 1919. Basil did the thing properly and joined the ranks and finished as Major. There was one hell of a row when the old man's will was read – but Veronica's worth ten of Paul when it comes to a slanging match. We're an amiable family as you perceive. Well, there's the record. Paul was to restore Wulfstane. Basil was to be Chancellor of the Exchequer. Martin was to join the Navy and be Admiral of the Battle Cruiser squadron. I was to climb Everest – alone and single-handed to the best of my recollection. Result, Paul is hardly tolerated in Wulfstane and his money is spat upon. Basil turns swindler and shoots himself. Martin is a semi-neurotic with a lame leg. I peddle bits and pieces from Tibet – and Everest is still unclimbed, and I too old to climb again. Damn! and again damn!"

He grinned wryly at Macdonald. "You encouraged me to talk, Inspector, and by hell, I've taken you at your word. Forget it! What about seeing the rest of the house? There's nothing in this morn to interest any one who hasn't a morbid imagination. If you are uncertain whether this door was locked, ask that chap who helped me smash the door in. If you think there's a trap door in the roof, climb outside and inspect. You'll find there isn't, and you'll likely break your neck and come through the tiles and laths and all the rest if you're not careful. I got out on the roofs once when I was a kid. The only way up is by a trap door above the staircase at the far end of the building. Paul locked it

for devilment when I was out on the tiles – and there's no other way down. I know. I'm not afraid of heights or of jumping and I never have been, but I spent hours on that blasted roof and never found a way down. The rain pipes are too old – soft lead. I tested them before I trusted my weight on them, or I shouldn't be here now."

Macdonald walked to the centre window and pushed the casement open. Looking down, he perceived that Long had been right – all of a thirty foot drop, and no foothold at all. Richard's voice spoke again behind him:

"I wish to God I knew what was in your minds, you fellows. The more you stare, the more I wonder. If you think a monkey could climb up or down that wall you'll have to find a monkey with wings – and if you got that condition fulfilled, what would it have to do with Basil shooting himself in that chair there... My God, I wish I could forget him..."

Macdonald turned away from the window. "Look here, this is getting on your nerves. Why not leave me alone to stare round? I've been sent down here to report according to our own routine, and I've got to take my time over it."

Richard Mallowood shrugged his broad shoulders.

"Sorry for the sob stuff, Inspector. You can please yourself about staring around, and take your own time over it, but if you want to get the hang of this building, you'll have time if you let me act as guide. Then you can come back here and meditate for the rest of the day if you like."

"Right, then let us go round the top floor now, and I will come back here later."

Richard proved a good guide. He led Macdonald through the maze of small rooms and passages and stairways which made up the north-east corner of the upper storey. He showed where the old staircase had been blocked by a wooden partition covered now with faded wallpaper of Victorian origin, and where the plaster of a dark passage covered an arched entrance which had once connected with the Elizabethan wing. They inspected the trap door which led to the roof and found the bolts sealed by the clearest of all evidence – the dusty spider's webs which take months in the forming.

"From the point of view of detection, evidence of a dry summer," said Richard. "When next it rains, someone will have to go up and replace some tiles."

At the end of their examination, Macdonald had to admit that there was one way up to the playroom and one only, and that was by way of the staircase at the west end of the corridor. It was close here, according to the evidence, that Veronica had stood a few seconds after the shot was heard upstairs. Richard recapitulated what had happened at that moment.

“I was in the bathroom between my room and Martin’s when I heard the report, and I was out on the landing within a few seconds. I could see the full length of the corridor from end to end. Ada, the maid, was still sitting on the floor with broken plates all round her; Veronica was coming towards her. A few seconds later the front door bell rang, Ada was sent down the main staircase, and Veronica and I ran to the west end of the corridor and up the staircase to the top storey. Inspector Long found us up there when he arrived a few moments later.” Richard paused here, adding, “If any one else had been on the west staircase or in the upper corridor, or in any of the upper rooms west of the playroom, we should have seen them. I opened every door as I went along, and you have seen those rooms on the south front at the top of the house. They’re all empty, and there’s nowhere to hide.”

Macdonald did not add that Long had examined those rooms also, and knew from the undisturbed dust on their floors that no one had been concealed in them.

It was at this juncture that Veronica appeared on the stairs, saying in her deep impatient voice:

“Are you dead, both of you? Richard, there’s a meal of sorts in the dining-room. I’m going out if nobody wants me. The foresters are felling some timber above Willow Farm. I shall be there if I’m needed.”

“All right, Ronnie. I shall be about the house. See you later,” called Richard. He turned back to Macdonald with a grin which was half grimace.

“Selling the timber... that’s the beginning of the end. If you’ve done with this floor come and see the rooms downstairs, and then I’ll leave you to wander, while I go and forage. When you’re hungry, find your way to the dining-room and take what you can find in the way of food.”

He led the way down the staircase connecting the two upper floors, and waited for Macdonald until they both stood at the west end of the long corridor which ran from end to end of the house.

“The two rooms at the end, facing west, are both unused,” he explained. “The one at the south-west corner was the one Paul had. I think he fossicked around in the other two rooms a bit – they all open out of one another, and I bet Paul nosed around to see if any more of the family bits and pieces had gone to the Jews. The old powder closet next to Paul’s room is used as a bathroom – best Victorian variety, with a frightful painted bath on a dais, and three steps leading up the necessary. Funny notion of preserving dignity on undignified occasions. You either go up steps or else go down them for all purposes in this house. The next room eastwards is my sister’s – also opening into the same bathroom. Damned silly, to say the least of it.”

He opened the door as he passed them, and Macdonald glanced into the two great panelled bedrooms – the “state rooms” of the house. Both had fourposter beds, with superb embroidered curtains and covers, faded but still beautiful relics of Queen Anne needlewomen, with fantastic conventional flowers worked in wool, and slender deer crouching in the spiralled stems of the pattern. Veronica’s room seemed fitted to its owner, Macdonald thought, its dimensions capable of absorbing a whole modern house, its walls panelled in sombre oak, its furnishings vast oaken presses and chests. It was bare of any personal belongings or adornment. Neither brushes nor bottles, boxes nor cosmetics were left out on the severe dark surfaces. There was not even a mirror to be seen. It reminded Macdonald of some of the exhibition rooms in state-preserved houses, impersonal, sombre, giving no signs of an inhabitant. “Late seventeenth century, including furniture.” Some such label seemed to be required to complete it. As though following Macdonald’s train of thought Richard observed with an impish grin:

“Sightseers are requested not to touch the exhibits... That press belonged to William of Orange. Pass along please...”

They now reached the great landing above the entrance hall, and the sun streamed in through the southern windows, shoving the dust on the floors, the unevenness of the wide oak boards, and the time-worn state of the woodwork.

“Mice, rats, worms and other niceties,” said Richard. “Watch your step, these floors are no joke.”

Beyond the stair head he continued:

“Blue room, sacred to guests, used by Mrs. Lorne, bathroom beyond.

Martin's room also opens into same bathroom. He has a choice of two, superior fellow – there's the 'bachelors bath room' on the further side. My room's the end one, opening off the smaller corridor, and Basil's is cheek by jowl with mine, with windows to the south. They're interconnected, but I'll leave you to find the door as an exercise in detection. Basil's room also opens into the Elizabethan wing, but I think the doors are blocked. There's a double door, with a space between – you'll find the same arrangement in many of these rooms. Amusing, when you're a kid. You see to it that the further door is locked, shove the unwary into the space and bang the nearer door on them. As there are no door handles on the inside in most cases the victim has a poor time until released."

He walked on to the end of the corridor and opened a door on the north side which gave on to another landing, several steps below the main one. From here the service stairs led downwards, and a screwed-up door, whose screws were rusted into their sockets – shut off the upper part of the same stairway.

"Why, and when, was it screwed up?" inquired Macdonald, and Richard replied:

"Some devilment on our part – Paul's and mine – when we were kids. The servants slept upstairs in those days. 'Nuff said. These rooms used to be occupied by lesser guests – who had to make do without a bathroom. Also they all connect up with one another – a convenient arrangement for one's guests, and one which caused considerable thought to nice-minded hostess. Well, shall I leave you to it? Food is below if you feel disposed to eat it."

Macdonald, when he was left alone, forgot all about food, and time, and anything but his immediate job. After Richard's footsteps had died away down the long corridor the great sunlit house was invested in silence. Remembering that the servants had left, Macdonald realised that apart from himself and Richard, the place was empty – a queer thought bearing in mind all the open windows and doors. Any one could walk into the manor, apparently – and there were plenty of valuable things which could be easily carried away. Apparently the Mallowoods were so arrogantly certain of their own security that they did not even consider precautions against burglary.

Macdonald went first into Basil Mallowood's bedroom. The door had been locked by the Superintendent, and the key was now in Macdonald's possession.

The bed had been stripped, and the room “cleaned” by Ada Brown after Basil had gone upstairs to the playroom on the morning of his death. There was little of interest left for a detective – only Basil’s suitcase, into which his belongings had been packed by himself – clothes and toilet articles thrust in carelessly in a heap. Long had glanced through them and listed them carefully; evening clothes, studs, shirts, collars and tie, silk socks and patent leather pumps: a dressing-gown of flaming magenta and black silk: striped silk pyjamas, magenta and blue (“not ‘arf gaudy,” Ada Brown had said, and “not half costly,” added Macdonald’s Scots mind as he felt the quality of the heavy silk), bedroom slippers, a sponge bag with shaving materials and razor pushed in carelessly with sponge and toothbrush – as no man in his senses would pack his kit; expensive ebony hairbrushes with silver monogram, intricate and showy, had been thrown in, with their case separate from them. Face cream and hair wash, a travelling shaving mirror and an ebony clothes-brush had all been tumbled in anyhow. Inspector Long – an admirably cautious officer – had seen to it that everything capable of bearing fingerprints had been examined for traces. His caution had resulted in several photographs of prints which coincided with those of the dead man, but showed no other prints at all. A similar result had been obtained from the leather writing-case upstairs in the playroom, and from the letter which Basil Mallowood had left on the carved table. Even the big key which had been turned on the inside of the playroom door had given traces of just the one set of prints, as had the stock of the gun and the arms of the chair in which the dead man had sat. “A nice clear case,” as Long had said bitterly.

Macdonald opened the window and looked outside. The room faced east: immediately below it were flag-stones outside the kitchens: a few feet away was a neglected shrubbery and then the high wall of the kitchen gardens. Nobody was in sight, and Macdonald hoisted himself on to the window sill with his feet inside and, leaning back as far as he could, looked up at the wall of the house above him. Its smoothness was only broken by the moulding below the playroom window, high above his head. Above that window was the stone balustrade which in part masked the sloping roof whose angle he had seen from within the unceiled playroom. ‘A monkey with wings might climb that wall,’ Richard had said, and Macdonald, who knew more than a little about

climbing, agreed with him.

Leaving Basil's room, Macdonald made his way to Martin's. This was a big room, like Veronica's, but with a clumsy section cut off from it to make the bathroom which Basil had mentioned. The room had been tidied by Veronica since Ada had left, and most of Martin's possessions were under lock and key. In this, alone of the rooms he had seen, Macdonald found a large number of books. Their titles, and some of the cases and nests of drawers, indicated that Martin still kept up his boyhood's interest in birds and wild creatures. In one corner of the room were some fishing rods, and Macdonald studied these with much interest. A fine, jointed salmon rod particularly took his fancy, and he examined it thoughtfully. He measured its length and sections carefully, noted the result, and after a moment went into the passage and walked along it. No one was about, and he returned to Martin's room, fetched the salmon rod and carried it to the end of the corridor and negotiated it up the stairs. He carried it along to the playroom, where he fitted the sections together. Then going to the window, looked down at the flagged yard, discovered nobody was in sight, and then manoeuvred the slender rod out of the window and raised it vertically, estimating the height of the balustrade above him. At one point in his eccentric performance the flexible end of the rod became involved with the balusters of the parapet above him, and he had to lower it carefully to get it clear. He then drew the rod inside, unfastened the extra sections and went downstairs and put it back in Martin's room.

Macdonald's next centre for observation was Paul's bedroom. He prowled round studying the panelled walls, and unlocked the connecting door which led into the other bedrooms on the west side. Here he found the arrangement which Richard had mentioned – the double doors with a space between them which was in reality the thickness of the walls. Some of these doors were secured by catches cunningly set in the moulding around the panels so that it took considerable ingenuity to discover them and release the spring which held the door. Both rooms beyond Paul's were furnished, but shrouded in dust sheets. Remembering Richard's comment about Paul "fossicking around," Macdonald examined the dusty floors and found prints of rubber soled shoes whose pattern had also left a few traces on the boards of Paul's own room.

The afternoon was drawing on when Macdonald, having wandered over

the entire house, including the unused Elizabethan wing, went downstairs at last into the empty hall. The great doors stood open to the misty sunlight, the wood fire smouldered faintly beneath a coil of blue smoke, and ring doves strutted self-consciously on the stone steps. It was very peaceful and quiet until the sound of a car broke in on the tiresome reiterations of the doves, who took to flight and circled around in a fuss and flutter of beige plumage. Macdonald stood by the fire and waited until the car drew up by the steps and its driver alighted and came up to the open doors. She saw Macdonald in the shadows at the back of the hall and said:

“Hallo, is Veronica in?” and then as she advanced, realised that it was a stranger who faced her.

“I beg your pardon. I thought you were Richard Mallowood. I couldn’t see properly, coming in out of the sunlight.”

Macdonald looked down at a fair vivid face, marvellously curled golden hair and very blue eyes, and made a good guess at the identity of the visitor.

“I think Miss Mallowood is out, but her brother should not be far away,” he said, and she asked quickly:

“Her brother? Do you mean Martin?”

“No. I mean Richard Mallowood. Are you not Mrs. Lorne?”

“Yes, I’m afraid I don’t remember you.”

“You don’t know me. My name is Macdonald.”

He drew out a card and handed it to her, and she read it, her fair face seeming to age as she frowned over it.

“Scotland Yard, but how awful! Has anything happened?”

She flushed, as though realising her own lapse, and added hastily, “I beg your pardon. That was idiotic of me. I mean has anything else happened? Is Martin all right?”

“I don’t know. He has not yet returned. I have been sent here to make additional inquiries concerning Mr. Basil Mallowood, and I should be grateful if you would answer a few questions.”

“I don’t know anything that would be of any use to you, Inspector Macdonald. I had left this house before that ghastly thing happened.”

She had recovered from her first surprise, and her voice and manner now achieved a deliberate coolness and remoteness – the coldly remote tone of a

woman putting a man in his place.

“So I gathered,” said Macdonald evenly, and then drew a bow at a venture, speaking with a certainty which gave no indication that he was hazarding the vaguest of guesses. “But you knew Basil Mallowood in town,” he added evenly.

His cool statement got its reward. Mrs. Lorne did not reply at once, but her face told Macdonald all that he wanted to know for the moment. She was quite obviously considering whether it was worth while to enter a blank denial of the detective’s statement. Macdonald continued:

‘It would be a considerable help if you could tell us anything about Mr. Basil Mallowood’s state of mind immediately prior to his death. It is also important to us to know if he had had any recent contact with his brother, Paul. The absence of the latter is creating difficulties in this inquiry. I thought perhaps you, who knew both brothers, could give us an unbiassed opinion.’”

Macdonald’s rather vague generalisms were calculated to produce the effect he intended – that was, to give Mrs. Lorne the impression that he had previous information about her acquaintance with the Mallowood brothers, so that she should not think it worth while to deny what was now, in Macdonald’s opinion, an ‘established fact.’ This lady, unlike Veronica Mallowood, was not an adept at concealing her thoughts.

“I don’t think my opinion is even worth stating, Chief Inspector. Presumably you want evidence to show that Basil Mallowood was so depressed by the situation in which he found himself that suicide seemed to be the only solution. I can assure you that he never gave me any inkling that he was in difficulties. He always seemed a very prosperous and contented person when I saw him, which was infrequently. I have known the Mallowoods for years, and been good friends with them, but they are a reticent family, not given to confidences.”

“So far as I can gather, Paul and Basil were far from being on a friendly footing,” went on Macdonald, “and I should very much like to know this. To what extent were they cognisant of each other’s affairs? In short, did the one discuss the other with you, who were an old mutual friend?”

“Certainly not.” The answer came quickly this time. “I found the best way of keeping up my friendship with both – as far as I did keep it up – was to make no reference to the other.” She was fiddling with her handbag as she

spoke, and took out a mirror, studying her face in the usual manner of the modern woman, and she gave a sudden exclamation as she held up the mirror.

“Veronica! What a start you gave me. I didn’t hear you come in.”

Macdonald had heard nothing, either, but Veronica was standing some yards behind him, in the shadows at the back of the hall. She came forward, saying:

“Nice of you to come over, Cynthia. Life has been pretty maddening, as you may imagine.” She turned deliberately to Macdonald.

“Have you finished your researches in our house, Chief Inspector? Without intending any discourtesy, it is disconcerting to one’s friends to be interrogated by a Police Inspector when they pay a friendly visit.”

“I’m sorry it’s disconcerting, Miss Mallowood, but I’m afraid it’s necessary. In common with you, I intend no discourtesy, but the problem which I am sent to investigate has disconcerted more people than your immediate friends. While I sympathise with you, I have to remember that I am briefed as representative of a public who have good reason to feel disconcerted over recent events.” He faced both women squarely, his lean dark face stern as he looked at them. “A police inquiry is an unpalatable proceeding to most people, but it is not instituted without cause. There are two ways of conducting such an inquiry, and of meeting it. One is by direct question, met by frank answer. It is less painful in the long run than the more tortuous form which has to find methods of uncovering evasion.”

“You are assuming evasion then?”

Veronica’s chin was up arrogantly, and Cynthia Lorne’s eyes were anxious.

“Not of necessity,” replied Macdonald, “but those who find most reason to be disconcerted by questioning are those with something to conceal. I will leave you to think it over.”

He walked down the steps to the drive, after a formal bow to both women. Veronica responded with an equally formal bow, but Cynthia Lorne only stared at him with startled eyes. Macdonald was not dissatisfied with his brief and seemingly barren interview with the last-mentioned lady. He was pretty well satisfied that Cynthia Lorne might well have been the channel through which Paul and Basil Mallowood acquired a modicum of information about each other. Cynthia was just the type of woman who receives men’s confidences.

Macdonald was interested, too, in Veronica's friendship with Mrs. Lorne. They seemed such complete opposites. Perhaps Veronica, too, had collected information about her brothers from the same source, meditated Macdonald, as he argued out possible variations on the intricate problem described ironically by Inspector Long as "a nice clear case."

CHAPTER EIGHT

“H ALLO, Jock. I rather suspected that you might put in an appearance, though I was afraid Long might be sent back to continue his intelligent observations.”

Macdonald turned round and stared. He was sitting by the fire in the parlour of the Mallowood Arms, having eaten an exceedingly good dinner of roast goose, to which he had done full justice.

“Well, I suppose you were to be expected, being also intelligently observant,” he said. “Are your fellow scavengers also on the scent?”

The long-limbed fellow who came in and pulled up a chair opposite to Macdonald was Peter Vernon, a journalist who merited the Chief Inspector’s description of him. Vernon had “a nose” for an interesting case, and was often to be found paying attention to odd happenings long after his professional colleagues considered the matter dead and done with. Vernon and Macdonald were old friends, and of all the journalists known to the latter Vernon was both the most trustworthy and the most acute.

“No. To the best of my knowledge and belief they were satisfied with the Coroner’s verdict,” replied Vernon, in answer to Macdonald’s query, twisting his long legs round one another and lighting another cigarette. “I’ve been down here ever since the inquest, talking to all and sundry. That’s a damned odd family, Jock.”

“Ay,” Macdonald glanced at Vernon with a grin. “Having eaten, Peter? Goose, and good at that.”

“Damn you,” replied the journalist with feeling. “Yes. I’ve eaten tough cold mutton, dry at that, at an inferior establishment two miles away. The chirp and chat in the bar made it worth while. Do you know they were betting on three chances, none of which took any stock in suicide.”

“Three?” inquired Macdonald. “Which three?”

“Veronica, Paul, and Martin, in order of favour,” replied Vernon. “Did that chap shoot himself, Jock, or didn’t he?”

“The evidence suggests that he did. There’s a damned lot to be explained away if he didn’t,” said Macdonald. “These local pundits have a habit of disregarding facts inconvenient to their pet theories. I’ll admit there are a few points which need explaining, but they seem to me to be facts subsequent to the shooting. What have you heard about the family, Peter?”

“That with the exception of Veronica and Martin, who act and think as one, they all hate one another like poison, and the family reunion was an almighty queer business. This chap Paul has always been livid with fury that the property wasn’t left to him. That’s common talk all around – passed on by successions of servants. One old blighter said he’d been waiting for years for Paul to murder his youngest brother and sister – and the assembled company didn’t seem to think he was overstating the case. Paul adores Wulfstane. His one idea in making money was to restore the place as it deserves to be restored, and Veronica and Martin won’t let him spend a penny on it, and just let it get more and more decrepit. Have you seen that Elizabethan wing, Jock?”

“Yes. I’ve been around the place half the day. The east wing will soon be a ruin if it’s not taken in hand. The roof tree’s rotting through, and the panelling is splitting off the mildewed walls – and yet Veronica Mallowood worships that house, Peter. You can read it in her face.”

“You ought to be able to read something else in her face, for she must be at war with herself,” said the journalist. “She’s an amazing creature. It seems that the mother died when Martin and Veronica were young, and she was brought up in that household of men by a father who openly derided her for her lack of charm, and never ceased rubbing in the fact that she couldn’t find a husband. All the money to spare – not much at that – was spent on the boys’ education. Veronica was taught by her father – poor wench. She never had any decent clothes, never went anywhere, had to ask her father for a stamp if she wanted to post a letter, and never had so much as a dress allowance until the old man died.”

“Why didn’t she clear out and get a job?” inquired Macdonald. “It’s not as though she lacks character, or ability, from the look of her. It seems sheer inconsistency for a woman of her type to stop at home under those conditions.

It's not as though she lived in the last century."

"Two reasons – both germane to the case. One was Martin. She always stood between Martin and the old man's cruelty. The other was the house. She's crazily attached to the house – and you see she got it in the end. The old man quarrelled with all his three elder sons, and left the house to Martin and Veronica. More rows over that. The other three were furious. Well, there you are. Think out the sort of youth that woman had. Look at her now. Is it any wonder that people who have known her all her life – or known of the circumstances she lived under – should suspect her of potentialities of violence? They say that apart from Martin she hates her brothers, particularly Paul and Basil. When they were children, the two elder brothers baited her like hell. She was a big, ugly, fierce-tempered hoyden with a bitter tongue. No wonder she gives one the jim-jams to look at now. There's something fantastic about her."

"And so what?" asked Macdonald.

Vernon stretched himself. "And so she's left with Wulfstane, and not enough money to keep its roof intact, let alone its walls," he went on, "and she won't touch her brothers' money because she won't tolerate their patronage. And then Basil, who's made off with a fair-sized fortune, shoots himself at his old home. How much boodle did he get clear away with, Jock?"

"You'll have to wait for the auditors to tell you that... Still – some. Everyone in the city knows that. Your guess is that Veronica's cornered it?"

"Why not? It's a theory – not wilder than that woman's personality. I've got a notion in my head that brother Basil, knowing he was stymied, came home to earth. I tell you you could hide in that house half a lifetime, Jock, and never be found. Say if she made a compact with him, got him to write that letter – and then emulated Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite?"

Macdonald shook his head. "Doesn't ring true. He wouldn't have trusted her. Besides – where's Martin?"

"Oh, he fits in all right. He knew what had happened, and did a bolt to save himself being asked questions, being a poor hand at lying. Jock, was that letter of Basil's foolproof? Was it really his writing?"

"So far as can be ascertained by comparison with what we can lay hands on. As a rule he used a typewriter or else dictated his letters, but his office

produced enough old chits to serve as a basis of comparison. The experts are satisfied – and so am I. Basil wrote that letter all right.”

Hunched up in his chair, Vernon frowned over the fire.

“Keeping to the Veronica theory,” he went on at last, “It’s Paul she was expected to do in, because Paul made a vow that he’d get Wulfstane for his own eventually – but Paul seems to have got off according to plan.”

Macdonald chuckled. “You’re toying with the same line of thought which has broken on all of us, including Long and myself, as a brilliant inspiration. Now you just listen. Paul Mallowood left Wulfstane at 7.50 – witnesses, Richard and the gardener. He drove through the village at 7.55. Witness, the innkeeper here and sundry others who had seen him the previous day. At 8.45, he pulled up at a garage three miles from Guildford and had a tyre pumped up. At 9.30 he arrived at Croydon airport, where his car was fetched by previous arrangement. His papers and passport were examined, and all the rest, and he left by plane at 10.15. Now while we’re on the subject, consider these further facts. Basil was seen by the maid, Ada Brown, and by Richard Mallowood about 9.15. He was spoken to by Veronica a little later. He was heard moving about upstairs at 11.30 – having taken the gun upstairs with him, according to the maid, who saw it in his bedroom earlier. He had only been dead a few minutes when Long examined his body, and the only fingerprints on that last letter are those of the dead man, identical with the prints on his toilet articles. These facts cramp a few picturesque theories pretty thoroughly, though they have no particular bearing on Veronica or Martin.”

“Except by inference. The chap who left in the Rolls Royce car could not have been concerned in the death of the man who shot himself – or who was shot.”

“That’s the size of it.”

“But Veronica – who needed money desperately for the upkeep of the house – has no word for it but her own that she was out of doors all the morning, and it’s not improbable that Basil had a thumping big sum on him when he left London, and, finally, there’s no sign of that sum about now. Correct me if I err.”

“You don’t. You might be a nuisance if you published your assumptions and queries as a free-lance – so don’t.”

“You know I won’t. Now the two people who were at a loose end all that morning were Veronica and Martin, and Veronica was nearest to the stairhead leading to the playroom when the shot was heard.”

“Yes, but Richard was also at a loose end most of the morning.”

“Isn’t it true that he was seen in the village when Basil – presumably – was heard moving about in the playroom?”

“Quite true.”

“And isn’t it also a fact that when the shot was heard, Richard was farthest from the stairway which was the only approach to the playroom?”

“Quite. Incidentally, have you picked up any gossip about Richard?”

“Not much. He’s not been about the place for years. The last time he came home was when the father died, and there was a glorious mutual row over the will. Richard appears to have been trotting round in the village, seeing his old acquaintances, and being generally matey. They say he’s the pick of the bunch. Paul is pompous and condescending. Basil ignored all the fellows who’d known him as a boy. Martin’s considered a bit daft. Richard’s quite well liked. Veronica – well, they’re all frightened of her.”

“And so back to Veronica – and Martin,” said Macdonald. “One of my wilder theories originally was that Basil shot Martin. The times make it not impossible. Also there was the fact of Veronica’s reaction when she ran upstairs after the shot had been heard. She kept calling Martin’s name as though she was certain he was up there. As you know for yourself, deceased was totally unrecognisable so far as his face was concerned. However, that notion soon came unstuck. The old doctor chap who’s attended Martin for twenty years said their physique was quite dissimilar. In short, corpse wasn’t Martin.”

“Lord, you’re getting me mixed,” said Vernon disgustedly. “I still believe the following theory, or some variation of it. Basil knew he was scuppered in the city when the big audit was decided on. What would have been his reaction? One of two things. Cut and run, or blow his brains out straight away... He didn’t bolt, but he must have had a plan of sorts in his head when he went back to Wulfstane. It’s no use telling me that he didn’t realise his game was up when he left the city on Monday. What if he made some sort of compact with Veronica – and things didn’t go according to plan?”

“Then can you tell me how Veronica persuaded him to sit in a chair, with the muzzle of a loaded gun under his chin while she pulled the trigger? And having told me that, just explain how she locked the door of the playroom on the inside, leaving the key in the lock? It’s a good stiff key, too. I’ve known contraptions achieved with bits of string, working out the immortal law of the lever, with a crosspiece through the key, but I can assure you that nothing of that kind would have worked here.”

Vernon stretched himself again. ” Well, well,” he said. ” So you’re satisfied that everything in the garden is law-abiding and lovely?”

“No. I’m not. I’m satisfied that someone has acquired a large bunch of negotiable securities; and that the brother Martin business is far from covered by the explanation offered to me. Incidentally, have you heard anything about Martin’s wandering habits in your village investigations?”

“Am I not saving you a whole lot of trouble?” inquired Vernon with a virtuous air. “Martin’s wandering habits are well established. Servants again have informed the village of his absences at one time and another. He does just go off the map at intervals – and no one has ever set eyes on him during these periods. Oh, yes. Martin’s aberrations could be used quite reasonably and effectively. In actual fact, as I expect the old doctor bloke told you, he’s very unstable. Given to nerve storms, and occasional loss of memory.”

Once again they sat and reflected, and then Vernon asked:

“What chances, if any, of a person being concealed in the playroom?”

“None whatever. The walls are plastered, not panelled. There is no cupboard, and no piece of furniture in which any one could be concealed. I thought of that. You can work out a nice theory whereby Basil was batted over the head, or knocked unconscious and then arranged and shot, but you’ve still got the problem of how the aggressor got away, and you’ve still got the more insoluble problem of that letter written by Basil.”

“Oh, damn that letter! What’s Paul’s handwriting like, Jock?”

“Ah! At last we veer away from the Veronica-Martin complex. Paul’s handwriting, according to the not very recent samples obtained from various indirect sources, is not unlike Basil’s. The family handwriting tends to similarity – but, the experts have given it as their opinion that that letter is no forgery. It was written quickly and flowingly, and there isn’t a single aspect of it which

suggests a forgery.” Macdonald knocked out his pipe on the grate, and then went on, “You seem to have been concentrating on Veronica as the evil doer. Why?”

“One. Motive. To obtain money, and to obtain it from a brother whom she was known to have hated in the past. Two. Opportunity. She knows that house as no one else knows it, and it’s probable that she was in the house all the morning, and had every opportunity of arranging things as she wished. Three. Method. What she doesn’t know about guns isn’t worth knowing.”

“All points equally vague. Not a thing to put before the Public Prosecutor, even, let alone a jury. I’ll try my hand with Paul on the same pattern. Motive, to acquire the house by gradually removing other members of the family. Note that Basil is dead, Martin has vanished, and people like yourself are trying to fasten a capital crime on to Veronica. Opportunity, nil, as at present observed, but ingenuity may suggest something. Method. Knowledge of guns equal to Veronica’s. Nothing sound except the motive. It’s a queer situation, Peter. Of the five members of the family three are off the map. One shot. Two whereabouts unknown.”

“Queer it is,” agreed Vernon. “Among a lot of uncertainties, are you certain of this point: that deceased was shot not earlier than 12.30 on the Wednesday?”

“Perfectly certain.”

“So that Paul cannot have shot Basil before he left.”

Macdonald laughed. “That’s it – in a nutshell – so far as I can see at present. The one thing that is absolutely certain is the time of death.”

“And that Veronica, with the possible exception of Martin, was nearest to the stairs leading to the playroom when the shot occurred?”

“Yes.”

“So we can count on the possible – or probable – collaboration of Veronica and Martin?”

“That’s hypothetical, and no amount of meditation on ingenious theories is going to get the case any further until a few more facts are brought to light. The first one to be studied in this locality is ‘Where is Martin and is he dead or alive?’ If he’s dead, then it looks as though Paul were at the bottom of it, no matter what improbabilities stand in the way, because Paul must have wanted

Martin and Veronica out of the way – but I don't think Martin is dead. I'm pretty certain he isn't."

"Why?"

"If you're going to accept the evidence of Veronica's devotion to her twin brother, you can't square her present attitude with a belief that he's been murdered. If Veronica thought that Martin was dead, she would be a raging fury out after his murderer. She isn't even anxious, Peter. All she wants is for the case to be closed down, so that she can be left in peace. Not only does she not believe that he's dead, she knows where he is, or I'm a Chinaman."

"Doesn't that fit in with all I've been saying?" broke in Vernon. "Basil's dead. Veronica's got the money she wanted, and in due time Martin will reappear and they will restore Wulfstane and cock a snoop at Paul. Incidentally, here's another theory about Paul's little journey into the unknown. Wasn't it possible that news leaked out in the city that Basil was riding near the wind, and Paul decided to be off the map when the bust-up came?"

"I don't know. Rumours do get round. You ought to be able to trace that sort of thing better than we can. Fleet Street wafts echoes to its intimates. But leaving Paul out of it, where is Martin?"

"Somewhere in that damned great house, tended by sister Veronica."

"I think so, too, and it's going to be a devil of a job to prove it. I've got a search warrant. I can arrive complete with my own men, architects, builders and structural experts, but I doubt if it would be any good. That house is built on a labyrinth of cellars. I suspect that some of them spread out under the terraces and right out into the park itself; the entrances and exits may be obvious to those who know the place, but to the uninitiated they'd be the devil. It'd take a week of Sundays to search the place adequately. Then there's this to it. If Martin is lying doggo by his own choice, and I should imagine that's the way of it, then if we corner him he may shoot himself. He's a neurotic, and to unearth his dead body is by no means the end we're aiming at."

"And so what?" grinned Vernon. "Research in camera? Speaking as one who has already done a bit of prowling, I'm all in favour of doing a little more. There's one entrance to the vaults in the shrubbery to the south of the east wing – but I haven't penetrated further. I've made a ground plan of the outside

of the house, with approximate measurements, and. a few notes on the immediate surroundings.”

Macdonald considered. “Sorry to cramp your style, Peter, but you’d better keep away from the house. I know you’re pretty canny, but I don’t want Veronica and co. to think that house is being watched. I’d rather they thought the reverse.”

“I get you,” said Vernon, quite good-humouredly. “Well, I’ve never got in your way yet, and I’m not going to start doing so now – though I’m mad keen to get to know that place better. Look here, Jock. What about brother Richard in all this? Does he know where Martin is, according to your theories?”

“He may suspect,” replied Macdonald, “but my reading of Veronica’s mind is that if she is hiding Martin as may be the case, she wouldn’t let Richard or any one else know about it. Of one thing I do feel certain, and that is that nothing can go on in that house without Veronica’s knowledge of it, but Richard is in a less privileged position. It’s twenty-five years since he lived there, and he’s only been back home a week. If Veronica and Martin wanted to pull wool over Richard’s eyes with regard to something going on inside the house, I think they’d manage it all right.”

“There are only the two of them living in the house at present, aren’t there?” asked Vernon, and Macdonald nodded.

“The two of them only – on the face of it. Personally I think it’s probable that Martin is there, too. We’ve got to find him somehow, but without precipitating a further tragedy. I think my best move is to go back to town, and let Veronica know I’m going, and reappear unobtrusively later.”

“Hm,” chuckled Vernon. “How’s town? I did a little private research before I came away but didn’t get very far.”

“Oh, did you? Have you heard of a Mrs. Lorne?”

“Have I not? I covered her divorce case – meaning the case she brought against her husband. I can tell you a few facts on my own personal observation. Mrs. Lorne was more than a little matey with Basil. She’s a very good dancer, and he was quite a pretty performer for a man of his weight. There’s a small private dancing club – very select and catering for the expert few – in St. John’s Wood. I was taken there by a lovely whose partner let her down at short notice. Basil and Cynthia Lorne were there, dancing very

prettily. In addition to that, I have seen the self-same Cynthia Lorne dining with Paul Mallowood at the Savoy.”

“What else do you know about her?”

“Nothing very interesting. She makes the dollars fly all right – and hasn’t over many to scatter at the moment. Both Paul and Basil Mallowood were men with money to spend, and that, I think, was their claim to attractiveness in Mrs. Lorne’s eyes. Are you considering whether her presence at Wulfstane on the Wednesday had any bearing on the matter? Of course, she was brought up within a few miles of the Mallowoods, and she seems to have been one of Veronica’s few friends.”

“Rather an odd pair to be friends,” mused Macdonald. “In giving evidence, both Veronica and Richard stressed the point that Cynthia Lorne was asked for the night in order to dilute the masculine nature of the party. The thing which interests me about her is that she was a link between Paul and Basil Mallowood in London. If either of them wanted news of the other without applying for it direct, I imagine that Mrs. Lorne could have supplied it.”

“Talking about Basil and Paul in London, have you had the privilege of viewing their habitations?” asked Vernon.

Macdonald replied by another question, “Have you?”

“I just called,” murmured Vernon. “The servants at Basil’s place were not entirely unforthcoming. They had their own views about his scheme of life, but no information at all as to where he spent his comprehensive week-ends. One can call upon logic and the King’s Proctor for an assurance that it was not chez Cynthia Lorne.”

Macdonald nodded. “We both seem to have arrived at the same, and the obvious, conclusions,” he observed. “Basil covered his tracks with unusual thoroughness and care. I think that he must have been living for years with a realisation that a rapid retirement might become necessary. There isn’t a photograph of him in existence barring his passport photographs, and they are not too good. If there had been another it would have come to light by now, for any photographer would jump at the chance of supplying one and reaping the profits. Problems – to find the establishment at which a prosperous city man spent half his time. I’m hoping that his car may lead us to the answer eventually, or else the taxi-ranks. I doubt if friend Basil patronised buses and

tubes exclusively, careful as he was. A man who is used to a car likes to drive from door to door.”

Vernon nodded. “He kept his car in a private lock-up in Manchester Mews: he had his repairs, washings and what nots attended to by Sun’s Garage, and as Sun’s minions and mechanics deal with a few thousand cars a day, they have no interesting reminiscences concerning a goodish newish Austin owned by prosperous city man. Now Paul’s two-seater Rolls Royce tourer was a far more noticeable outfit.”

“As Paul’s scheme of existence was a far less devious matter than Basil’s, so far as I can gather,” replied Macdonald. “However, if Basil’s private haunt is not run to earth in a day or two, I shall lose faith in my own department.”

“It may prove to be a bit late in the day, Jock,” said Vernon. “Didn’t his banking account give any information?”

“None so far. Frequent cheques made out to self, cash generally taken in pond notes. He was a thoughtful soul. On the week-end previous to his leaving London, he asked for his bank statement, and the return of outstanding old cheques. He either destroyed the lot, or left his passbook at some spot unknown to us. His record in the bank ledgers was singularly unenlightening.”

“Have you any powers to examine Paul’s banking affairs Jock?”

“None whatever. We’ve nothing against Paul officially – not at the moment, any way. His banker, like his fellow director, would refuse any information in the client’s absence. The fact that one brother has embezzled and subsequently shot himself does not bring the other brother within reach of the law. The only information given by Paul’s bankers was the numbers of notes recently issued to him. One of these was changed at the garage where he put in on the Wednesday morning on his way to Croydon.”

Vernon grinned. “This is a damned interesting case, Jock. I can see a lovely lot of variations concerning its permutations and combinations – but take my word for it, Veronica and/or Martin thought it all out in their leisure time.”

“I’m not saying you’re wrong,” said Macdonald, and Vernon retorted:

“But you’re being precious careful not to state your own notions, Jock. Incidentally, I picked up one bit on my way home from the pub in Mallowdene last night. You know Higgins the gardener?”

“Ay. Higgins it was who put Paul’s suitcases in the boot of the Rolls. Higgins has been trying to work that garden single-handed for two years – stout fellow.”

“And during his efforts among the herbaceous borders he overhears a bit from the windows. Now it seems to me likely that if you asked him what he’d overheard he’d tell you that he wasn’t in the habit of listening in – but I’ll make you a present of his results for what they’re worth. When Paul arrived on Wednesday, Veronica took him up to his room – the one at the south-west corner of the Jacobean wing. Higgins was working in the border immediately below the window. Paul and Veronica had a long talk, and Veronica ended up by saying that Basil had offered to help her, and of the two of them, she preferred to become dependent on Basil. Now counting on Veronica’s queer sense of humour, that’s a way of saying that she sees her way out via Basil.”

“How did you overhear this, or was it a direct confidence on Higgins part?”

“Not on your life. I walked behind the couple of hearties when they left the bar, both well primed.”

“You don’t seem to have wasted much time during your stay in the neighbourhood,” observed Macdonald. “Can you tell me this. Where’s the nearest salmon river to here?”

“Lord, I don’t know. Miles away,” said Vernon disgustedly. “Why?”

“I found a salmon rod in Martin’s bedroom – a good one. It was strong, but nice and light and flexible. Have you ever cast fly in a strong wind?”

“I have.”

“So have I. The line, thin as it is, blows out on the wind. If you tied some tags on to the line, so that it resembled the tail of a kite, it would blow out still harder. If, in addition, you weighted the end of the line you could do some odd things with it.”

Vernon stared. “I’ve known you for a long time, Jock, and we’ve seen some damned odd things in the course of that time. Never having known you talk through your hat before I’m assuming you’re talking sense now – but I can’t see the point.”

“Well, think it out. You say you’ve made a plan of the exterior of Wulfstane. You attended the inquest. You know all the facts I know – and

you've made me the present of a few additional ones, for which I'm not ungrateful. The existence of the salmon rod is my own private contribution. It may be demonstrated before a jury one day. Apply your wits and see if you can make any application of it."

And with that Macdonald refilled his pipe and Vernon sat and stared at the fire, twisting his mobile face in comic perplexity.

CHAPTER NINE

BEFORE Macdonald left London he had entrusted Inspector Jenkins and Detective Sergeant Reeves with the job of pursuing inquiries into the life of Paul and Basil Mallowood in London. It was curious how all inquiries about Basil seemed to result in a dead end. He had belonged to a club, but he seldom used it, save for occasional meals, and had had no correspondence addressed there. He had not played golf, he had not played bridge, and his social activities were confined to entertaining his friends to dinner – (he had a name for giving very good dinners) – and to theatre going. He had been an enthusiastic playgoer, and had taken an intelligent interest in the stage, but since his interest was only that of an onlooker, the fact added little to the sum total known about him. At his office – a prosperous Investment Trust whose shares had stood high – he had been regarded as a first-rate financier and a very hard worker, but his colleagues had had few dealings with him beyond the scope of office routine. An occasional dinner or theatre party had been the total of his social contacts with them. It was not difficult to see that Basil Mallowood had been unpopular in a social sense. He had been a self-opinionated man and had had a very quick temper, and no sense of humour. His knowledge of international finance had been encyclopaedic, and he was a naturally fine mathematician, but his colleagues had found him heavy going socially. His dinner parties – generally for men only – had had a cachet on account of his ability to choose an interesting menu. He had taken food seriously, and his knowledge of wines and continental cooking had won for him the regard of the famous restaurateurs and head waiters, but they could tell nothing concerning him apart from his knowledge of their art. Inquiries as to how – and where – he spent his holidays, resulted in the vague reply that he usually went abroad. He had obviously known the south of Europe well, and had been as far afield as Egypt

on occasions, but he did not exchange notes about his holidays as most men did. There were plenty of his acquaintances who were now only too ready to say, "I always thought there was something fishy about the fellow, he was one of those secretive men who hated giving a plain answer to a plain question," – but none of them could give any information which was valuable from a detective's point of view. Reeves put in a lot of hard work asking questions and following up suggestions from the garage where Basil Mallowood had garaged his car, but none of these led him anywhere.

It was one of Macdonald's suggestions which at length bore fruit in the difficult problem of discovering where Basil had spent his week-ends. The Chief Inspector had suggested that the Motor Insurance Companies might be able to help. If Basil Mallowood had ever been involved in a car-crash there was a possibility that the evidence put forward to the company when a claim was made might contain something useful. On inquiry, it was found that Basil himself had been a blameless driver. He had earned the fullest possible bonus on the "no claim" principle and had, so far as could be ascertained, never been involved in a car crash through his own fault. "Damned cautious beggar," grunted Reeves to himself, being conscious that his own driving record was not so blameless. But Basil's own Insurance Company – the Provincial and Metropolitan – proved to be unexpectedly helpful in producing details of a claim in which a Mr. George Harford (insured by the same company), had done damage to Basil Mallowood's car in a crash in which the latter was blameless. Mr. Harford had been guilty of driving on to the Watford by-pass road from a secondary road without the "due care and attention" demanded by the Highway Code, and had inflicted some small damage to the wings and coachwork of Basil Mallowood's Sunbeam.

"Hoping for something but expecting nothing," Reeves set out to interview Mr. George Harford. The latter proved to be a retired commercial traveller, living in a pleasant little house between Elstree and St. Albans. Reeves called there in the evening, and Mr. Harford, a grey-haired jovial little man of sixty, looked at the C.I.D. man with the expression which every policeman gets to know so well – a compound of anxiety and curiosity, as of a man searching his conscience for recollection of illicit acts, and at the same time wondering what his neighbour has been up to.

Reeves himself was a neatly built, dark-headed fellow, with intelligent bright eyes and a capacity for making himself pleasant. That is to say, he knew when to be talkative and when to be politely official, having the wits not to get out of his depth in what he termed “high-brow stuff.” There was nothing high-brow about either Mr. Harford or his establishment, and Reeves felt that it would be easy to get on to terms with him.

“I’m sorry to bother you, sir, but we are hoping you could help us with some information,” he said, when Mr. Harford came to speak to him in the entrance hall of “Belle Vista.”

“That’s as may be, officer. Come along in. I’m all for keeping on the right side of the law, and I don’t call to mind having murdered any one recently,” replied Mr. Harford.

Seated in the untidy but comfortable “den” of the master of the house, Reeves went on:

“You’ll call to mind a little collision you had at the corner of Elms Avenue and the Watford by-pass last May, Sir?”

“Good Lord, but that’s all settled and done with months ago,” replied Mr. Harford indignantly, and Reeves nodded reassuringly.

“Yes, Sir. It’s nothing to do with reopening that case, or anything of that kind. I’m making inquiries about the other party in the matter – the owner of the car you collided with. I expect you remember his name.”

“Can’t say I do – I’ve a shocking memory for names,” replied Mr. Harford. “I know it was an uncommon sort of name. I’ll look it up for you if that’s all you want.”

“No. I know the name – Mallowood, Basil Mallowood,” replied Reeves, and seeing no response on the other’s face, he added, “Haven’t you noticed the name in the papers lately, sir?”

“No. I’m afraid I haven’t. The fact is, I don’t bother much about the papers these days. I’ve got very keen on gardening since I retired, and the papers don’t interest me much, barring the pools and racing results,” said Mr. Harford with a lively wink, adding, “that’s hoping you won’t use same in evidence against me, officer.”

Reeves grinned. “That’s nothing to do with me, sir, there’s plenty of sound folk enjoy a flutter sometimes. Now about this Mr. Mallowood,” and Reeves

gave a short resumé of the facts concerning Basil Mallowood's suicide, his words being interspersed by ejaculations of surprise from Mr. Harford, until Reeves concluded: "Now we are trying to collect all the evidence we can about Mr. Mallowood, particularly about any assets left by him, and we're not at all satisfied we've got to the bottom of the matter. In confidence, we think it possible he may have held other property under a different name, and we are trying to locate it."

Mr. Harford showed an immediate appreciation of this point, and treated Reeves to another wink.

"Ah, ha! Looking for the keyhole to fit the second latch key, officer?"

"I didn't put it quite that way myself, sir," said Reeves, "but between you and me, that's the idea – though you might get into very serious trouble if you suggested such a thing to any one else," he added warningly, and Mr. Harford rubbed his nose with a stubby finger.

"I get you," he replied. "Well, I don't see that I can help you much, but I do know that he had a very high-class dame in that car with him. Was he married, by the way?"

"Not to our knowledge," replied Reeves, and Mr. Harford put in suddenly:

"That'll interest our Elsie, that will. Elsie, she's my daughter, and a very good daughter, too. She was in the car with me that day we had our spot of trouble. He was a nasty nose-in-air sort of cuss," went on Mr. Harford. "Spoke to me as though I was dirt, and made enough fuss to beat the band. I was in the wrong, and I knew it, but that Malloby, or whatever his name was, he was real downright disagreeable, and made fuss enough so's you'd think his whole outfit was wrecked and himself crippled for life, instead of its being a matter of a dented wing and scratched paint. Our Elsie, she told him so, she was that mad the way he spoke to me. Funny, it was about the dame who was with him I was talking about. Elsie summed her up afterwards. 'Thinks a lot of herself, but I bet I know what sort she is,' said our Elsie – and if that's libel, officer, well, you asked me to talk, and I've taken you at your word."

"Just so, sir," replied Reeves cheerfully, "and I hope you'll go on talking. We get a lot of things told us in our job, and we know what not to put in our reports. Now I wonder if you could give me a description of this lady you're talking about."

“That’s a tall order for a chap like me, officer. It’s our Elsie you want to talk to. Come to think of it, she had a lot to say about that classy bit of goods in the Sunbeam. Elsie, she was an assistant at the Purple Orchis – that’s one of those high class road-houses out Penharden way, and Elsie said she’d seen this dame dancing there. I didn’t listen to all her chatter at the time, being worried about that collision we’d had, but Elsie, she’d remember all about it. I know the lady was a very smart sort of customer, turned out in first-rate style, though I’m not partial to paint myself. A blonde she was – gold hair and blue eyes, like you get in the story books, but not all that young.”

“It looks to me as though I’d better go and make friends with your Elsie,” said Reeves cheerfully. “Is she still at the Purple Orchis?”

“No. They cut down staff when the summer motoring season’s over,” replied Mr. Harford. “She’s in the box office of the Superb Cinema in St. Albans now. She’s on duty this evening, too. If you cut along now, you’d find her just at a slack time, before the 9.0 o’clock house starts.”

Reeves wasted no time in falling in with this excellent suggestion, and drove on to St. Albans, where he found Miss Harford in the booking office. Her father had rung up and told her that a C.I.D. man was calling to see her, and Elsie was all agog over this event. However, since the evening’s bookings promised to be unusually large, and the box office was by no means having a quiet time, Elsie Harford made the sensible suggestion that Reeves should go in and see the picture through and talk to her afterwards.

The C.I.D. man agreed to this pleasant variation on his duty, and spent a pleasant evening chuckling over “Contraband.” Reeves had summed up Elsie Harford as a shrewd, capable young woman of the modern type, “hard as nails, but quick in the uptake” was Reeves’ estimate of her, and he felt hopeful that she might be able to produce some useful facts.

When the film was drawing to its close, Reeves went back to the box office and was invited into an inner office. Miss Harford looked at him with her shrewd appraising eyes – eyes which missed nothing.

“I’ve told the manager you want some evidence about a car collision, and that I’m only a witness,” she said. “You can tell him the same yourself, so’s he doesn’t get it into his head the police are out after me.”

“I’ll do that all right,” agreed Reeves, and continued with a succinct

account of his errand. Miss Harford listened attentively, staring at Reeves with her hard bright blue eyes – she was a bit like a good china doll herself, Reeves thought, with her rouged cheeks, tightly curled hair, and unwinking stare.

“Yes, I see. You want to know where she lives,” said Elsie Harford. “I can’t say I’m keen on giving people away to you cops,” she added. “After all, it’s not her fault if her boy friend was a rotter, but I was mad the way he spoke to my dad, and she just sat there, looking at us as though we were a nasty smell, and Mum crying because she was all upset. Well, as it happens, I’ve seen her again – the last evening I was at the Purple Orchis. She was wearing a real lovely frock, one of those queer petunia colours with a silver sash and silver shoes. I know where she got that frock, too. There’s a French dress shop in Golders Green. Sounds a bit rum, but this Madame Collette, she sells just lovely things – lovely prices, too, you bet. It was at the end of September that frock was in the shop – I saw it when I went in with a girlfriend who wanted a job as mannequin.”

“By jove, that’s jolly smart of you,” said Reeves. “It’s a bit of luck for me, you being so observant. So few people notice things, or if they notice them they forget all about them.”

“If you’d had the jobs I’ve had you’d have learnt to be observant,” she retorted crushingly. “My word, you see some queer goings on and some queer customers in a place like the Purple Orchis. Even in a box office you’ve got to be pretty spry.”

“I bet you have,” said Reeves. “Now look here. Can you help me a bit more? I want a description of that frock you saw the lady in – a real good description, so that the owner of the shop couldn’t fail to recognise it – unless, of course, your girl friend got the job of mannequin there. In which case, she might help.”

“You’re jolly certain we’re all on tiptoes yearning to help you, aren’t you?” retorted Elsie. “My friend – I know what she’d say to you – ‘Don’t know, I’m sure,’ – and you can’t get past that, can you? If I’d like to’ve made out I was just stupid and hadn’t noticed, you couldn’t have made me remember, and that’s a fact.”

“No. I couldn’t, but neither would you have made me believe you were stupid,” said Reeves with a grin. “We use our eyes in my job, too. Then there’s

this to it," he went on more seriously. "You may be scornful about helping the police, but come to think of it, you wouldn't have much chance of getting on in the world if there weren't law and order and all that. Our job's to prevent people getting swindled, and you've got the brains to know it. You were mad because you say this Mr. Mallowood looked down his nose at your dad. You'd have been madder if your dad had been swindled – and madder still if other people pretended to be silly instead of helping so that your dad could get his rights."

"My! You don't half talk when you get going," she replied. "Still, you do talk sense, I'll say that for you. Now look here, it's getting late, and they want to close down here. If you come back to-morrow night, I'll have seen my friend, and I'll find out the name of the customer who bought that frock and tell you, and after that you ought to stand me a private tour of Scotland Yard."

"I would – if I were allowed," said Reeves, "but I tell you I shall be jolly grateful, and you'll have done a good bit of work."

"Hope so, though it still seems a bit mean to me," she replied. "Still, I suppose it's all on the square, you being a Yard fellow," she concluded.

Reeves filled in the next day with a variety of jobs. He had now got copies from the Passport Office of photographs of Paul, Basil and Richard Mallowood, but, like most passport photographs, they were very indifferent portraits, and might have passed for a variety of dark-haired, dark-eyed men. He also got into touch with Macdonald by telephone, and received further instructions as to his next move if his inquiry progressed favourably.

Miss Elsie Harford would have been exceedingly indignant had she known that an unobtrusive woman-detective, hitting without hesitation on the time that two working girls would meet, had sat next to them in a café in Golders Green where Elsie had made an assignation with her mannequin friend, Ida Brown, and that the said woman officer had listened-in very successfully to the bulk of the girls' conversation. By two o'clock in the afternoon, Reeves had learnt that the purchaser of the petunia frock was a Mrs. Brownleigh, and that her address was in Varley Close, a new "residential estate" just off Hendon Way. The lady in question was well known at Madame Collette's, and the woman detective was much entertained by the naïve manner in which Elsie Harford asked her friend questions. In fact, Elsie's shrewdness in covering the

real reason for her inquiries under a show of tremendous interest in clothes was a real piece of detective work which the officer duly appreciated.

The next step in the enquiry took both Detective Reeves and his woman colleague (Detective Caroline Wright) into the vicinity of Varley Close to test the question if they were on the right scent or merely following a promising red herring. “Alvarley,” Mrs. Brownleigh’s house, proved to be closed, its owner away. Inquiries of her neighbours elicited the fact that she had “gone on a cruise” a month ago, though no information was forthcoming as to the direction of her cruise. Detective Wright was able to put in some useful work with the neighbouring servants, under cover of a hypothetical domestic job offered by a distant registry office, and she learnt that Mrs. Brownleigh had had two daily maids (who came from Golders Green) but no resident servant. Mr. Brownleigh, she was told, was not often at home, barring week-ends, and no one seemed to know much about him, except that he had a “posh car.” Mrs. Brownleigh was a very stand-offish neighbour, and her servants resembled her in being uncommunicative.

Reeves, armed with copies of the passport photographs, was able to take a more direct line. He made inquiries of postman, roadman, errand boys and neighbouring tradesmen. Three of these identified “Mr. Brownleigh” with the portrait obtained from Basil Mallowood’s passport. A nearby garage owner preferred Paul Mallowood’s portrait as the likeness of Mr. Brownleigh, who had occasionally put in for petrol. The postman said that all letters for “Alvarley” were being readdressed to Mrs. Brownleigh’s bank – the City and Provincial branch in Hendon. Reeves made his way to this establishment and asked to see the manager.

The C.I.D. man knew well enough that while bank managers are not in the least likely to give information about their clients’ affairs without a very authoritative demand from the powers that be, the said managers are very safe recipients of a confidence.

Mr. Thornhill, manager of the Hendon branch, was a rather lawyer-like, grey-haired man, severe of face and sparing of words. Reeves presented his police card, stated that he was employed on the inquiry into the affairs of the late Basil Mallowood, and asked for an assurance that the interview might be regarded as confidential. The C.I.D. man watched the manager’s face carefully,

for the former was pretty certain that Mallowood's affairs must be a matter of burning interest to all interested in finance and investment, and he saw Mr. Thornhill's rather lack-lustre eyes brighten in anticipation.

"You may rest assured that your confidence will be respected, officer. What brings you to me?"

"Information received leads us to believe that the late Mr. Mallowood spent a portion of his time – week-ends, as a rule – in a house whose lessee is one of your clients, sir. The matter is not established beyond dispute, and it is necessary to move very carefully. That is why I laid so much stress on the confidential nature of this interview. To put the matter plainly, three different persons have identified a photograph of Basil Mallowood as a man commonly known as Mr. Brownleigh. Mrs. Brownleigh, of Alvarley, is one of your clients in this branch, I understand."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed the manager, his voice utterly horrified. "You amaze me, officer! Have you substantial grounds for this allegation?"

"Substantial enough to justify me in this inquiry, sir. I came to you hoping that you might be able to help me with information. Is Mr. Brownleigh known to you?"

"No, certainly not. I have never seen him and know nothing about him. Mrs. Brownleigh has a private account here, and I know her slightly. She once said that her husband was frequently abroad and kept his banking account separate from hers. Naturally I made no further comment. My only concern was with Mrs. Brownleigh's account – a matter which has never occasioned me any anxiety."

"I gather that the lady herself is now abroad, sir, and that her letters are being forwarded by your branch," went on Reeves, but Mr. Thornhill retorted sharply:

"You are outrunning your information, officer. However, before we proceed further, I think that you said that you had a photograph of Basil Mallowood?"

"Yes, sir. Here it is."

Mr. Thornhill glanced at it, and then said:

"As I told you, Mr. Brownleigh is unknown to me, but the head clerk here lives in the Brownleighs' neighbourhood, and has seen Mrs. Brownleigh out

with her husband. I will ask Mr. Wilson – our head clerk – to come in, and you can see if he recognises the photograph. I believe it is customary in these cases to offer a variety of photographs for identification?”

“Yes, sir. I will follow the usual routine,” replied Reeves, producing a number of photographs from his wallet.

A moment later Wilson, the head clerk, a man not far short of Mr. Thornhill’s age, came into the manager’s office, and the latter said:

“I think you know Mrs. Brownleigh’s husband by sight, Wilson. This is a confidential matter, but this officer from Scotland Yard wishes you to try to identify Mr. Brownleigh’s photo from the collection he will show you – if Mr. Brownleigh’s is among them.”

Reeves spread out his photographs – a collection of very varying types, and Mr. Wilson studied them carefully. He picked out the one of Basil Mallowood after a careful scrutiny, saying:

“This, I should say, is a photograph of the man I have frequently seen with Mrs. Brownleigh. It is not a very good likeness, but I give it as my opinion that it is the man whom I have seen entering and leaving Mrs. Brownleigh’s house. I don’t think I can be mistaken, though I should hesitate to swear to it.” He studied the photograph again, axed then added, “I’m pretty well certain. It’s ‘a strongly marked type of face.’”

Reeves thanked him, and the head clerk left the office, after a glance of inquiry at the manager, who said nothing to satisfy the other’s evident curiosity. Mr. Thornhill then said to Reeves:

“You seem to have established your point, officer. I can only tell you that I am amazed – absolutely, amazed. However, to anticipate your further questions, we have no record of any transactions here which could further your inquiry. Neither are we in possession of Mrs. Brownleigh’s address. She wrote advising us that she was going abroad for an unspecified period, and asked us to hold any letters readdressed to her here until she could let us have a forwarding address. Since then she has not advised us further.”

With this information Reeves had to be content for the moment. Any examination of Mrs. Brownleigh’s account or correspondence was a matter for his superior officers to arrange with the directors of the bank – and very good reason would have to be found before the bank officials would part with any

information at all concerning the affairs of their client. In this matter, Reeves was not greatly interested. He had, with the assistance of considerable good luck, established the point with which he had been entrusted – the discovery of Basil Mallowood's alternative home.

Reeves did not forget his evening appointment with Elsie Harford: he considered that she had earned the undoubted pleasure of passing on information to the C.I.D., and he thanked her with due gratitude for the assistance she had undoubtedly given him.

Meantime his researches and their results had been put before the Yard authorities, with whom Macdonald had been in communication. The latter had urged the need for prompt furtherance of investigations at "Alvarley," and a search warrant was issued. Inspector Jenkins and Reeves were empowered to search on the strength of Mr. Wilson's identification of Basil Mallowood's photograph as the man known by sight as Mr. Brownleigh.

"Alvarley" was a detached house, standing in its own garden and well screened from its neighbours. Having informed the local police of their purpose, Reeves and Jenkins walked unobtrusively to the back of the house, where Reeves had previously done some reconnoitring on his own. Alvarley was a modern house, and a well-built one. Its steel framed windows and up-to-date locks offered no promise of easy entry on the ground floor, but Reeves had spotted an open window on the first floor which he thought he could negotiate with some help from Jenkins. Reeves would himself have made a very skilful burglar, for he could climb like a monkey and insinuate his long thin powerful arms round improbable looking angles and into unpromising looking spaces. Inspector Jenkins, having stood like a rock while Reeves took a spring from his colleague's powerful shoulders, watched the agile younger man achieve a precarious looking hand-hold on a narrow ledge and haul himself up "like a performing monkey," spread-eagled in front of a bathroom window whose upper ventilator was open. Reeves got one of his long arms through the ventilator and reached downwards towards the window catch, while Jenkins stood below, prepared to field him if he slipped. Reeves did not slip. His stockinged feet managed to grip the absurdly narrow ledge while he reached like a professional contortionist through the ventilator, a long slender pair of pliers in his hand, and the window was unfastened in a surprisingly short space

of time. Reeves slipped through into the bathroom, grinned down at Jenkins saying "All correct. See you later," and vanished inside. A few minutes later he reappeared at the open back door, and Jenkins slipped inside and the door was closed behind them.

"Nice house, all very up to date and stylish," murmured Reeves. "That's a classy bathroom and no mistake. Wouldn't mind a bath in it myself. You take the ground floor and I'll take upstairs."

Reeves did a rapid tour of the first floor, appreciating the admirable lay-out of the architect-built house, for he was a domestic soul at heart. Servants' quarters complete with bathroom and service stairs were arranged over the kitchens. These were furnished, but apparently unused. A big bedroom, decorated in pale grey with petunia coloured curtains, bedspread and cushions, faced south. It had a marvellous built-in dressing-table in an alcove, with long triple-winged mirror, crystal and chromium fittings winking in the sunlight which shone in when Reeves drew back the taffeta curtains. "My eye! Some beauty parlour!" said the detective to himself, as he crossed the heavy pile carpet of silver grey to investigate the dressing-room and the bathroom connecting with the chief bedroom. With rubber gloves on his hands, Reeves opened the fine Compactum wardrobe in the dressing-room, and saw "Mr. Brownleigh's" suits and shirts, collars and shoes, ties and handkerchiefs, all arranged in the neatest possible way in that admirable piece of furniture. Reeves took out a measuring tape and busied himself with the garments and shoes. Later, he produced insufflator and powder, camera and flashlight outfit, and busied himself with recording fingerprints. Jenkins was similarly occupied downstairs, and the two experts worked for hours without exchanging comments.

When Reeves was through with his part of the job, he went downstairs and found Jenkins carefully rearranging the contents of a writing bureau. The older man chuckled as he saw Reeves.

"Everything very nice and orderly. Silver and that at the bank. Old letters destroyed. Minimum of papers – lease, insurance policy, and sundry tenant's agreements. Plenty of receipts – but nothing personal. A very careful business-like tenant."

Reeves nodded. "Hardly to be hoped for he'd have written letters for

them to be left about. However, I've got a nice selection of prints – not all the lady's, by a long chalk."

Jenkins nodded. "Yes. I've got some useful specimens in that line. Anything else?"

"Clothes and shoes. His. Measurements right. Tailor's name inside. Ought to be O.K."

It was after they had left the hoes, having removed all traces of their visit, and were on the return journey to London, that Reeves bought an early edition of the Evening Standard when his car was held up in a traffic block.

"Gosh – see that!" he exclaimed to Jenkins. "Stop press news."

The big Inspector read the brief paragraph as Reeves negotiated the car through the complexities of the traffic at Swiss Cottage.

"Reuter reports the death in Tunis of Mr. Paul Mallowood, eldest brother of the late Basil Mallowood. Paul Mallowood was found stabbed in a low quarter of the town known to be dangerous to foreigners."

"Taking it all round, I'm not surprised," said Jenkins. "I hope they're careful with their identifications over there. Reckon this'll mean a plane-trip for somebody."

"What do you bet he won't be identifiable by the time somebody gets there?" asked Reeves, but Jenkins only replied:

"The chief'll be keener than ever to find Martin Mallowood after this. He's the missing link. Richard's here in England, and his sister, too."

"If I were Richard, I shouldn't be all that keen on staying put," said Reeves. "Things don't look too healthy for members of his family just now."

CHAPTER TEN

ON the evening of the day following Macdonald's first visit to Wulfstane Manor, Richard Mallowood strode into the hall from the drive and paused by the wide open front door. The sun had just set, and mist was settling in white swathes over the grass, waist high, the fantastic wraiths ghost-like in the still air. The rose of sunset was fading from the sky; the west now faintly saffron with a white pinprick of evening star just strengthening against the fading daylight. Inside the house the panelled hall was sombre and shadowy, its colours merged into the grey tones of twilight.

With an exclamation of impatience, almost exasperation, Richard put down the electric switches at the entrance and slammed the great oaken doors to and bolted them in place. Then he went to the fireplace, kicked the smouldering logs together and seized the bellows to blow them into a blaze. The evening air was chilly and he felt it in his very bones after years spent under tropical suns. The well-dried logs soon flared up above the dull red heap of ashes on the worn hearthstone, and Richard crouched close to the comfortable heat, lighting a cigarette and warming his chilled hands. A sound above caught his attention as he called out:

"That you, Ronnie?"

"Yes. I'm here. That fire looks good."

She came downstairs and stood beside the open hearth, and Richard offered her a cigarette, and as he lighted it for her he said:

"Well – how much longer are we going to carry on in this crazy fashion, Ronnie?"

"If you feel like that, there's no reason for you to stay here," she replied calmly. "Owing to circumstances over which you had no control, to use the good old cliché, your stay here has been unnaturally prolonged. Very tiresome for you – but there's no need for you to strain your altruism by staying any

longer.”

“Don’t be an ass,” he replied, equally calmly. “I’ve no intention of leaving you alone in this demented house. Look at it, Ronnie! I’m not exigent about the niceties of life, for I’ve lived under some damned primitive conditions on occasion, but I’ve never seen a presumably civilised house in such a hell of a mess as this one is achieving. Admittedly domesticity isn’t in your line. Well, for God’s sake get some domestics to run the place, or else shut it up and go away. If you’d even have Higgins and his wife to live in for a while you wouldn’t be so badly off. What’s bitten you, Ronnie?”

“Nothing. I’m doing exactly what I’ve always done and intend to continue to do, live in my own house without interference, Richard. There’s no need for you to stay. I quite realise how uncomfortable you are.” Her deep voice had its habitual tone of light mockery, and Richard gave an exclamation of impatience.

“Do, for God’s sake, talk sense,” he retorted. “How can I go away and leave you alone in this blasted barracks? It’s insane! The village people think you’re mad – and I’m mad. You’re just asking for trouble. How many doors are there on the ground floor of this house – and how many of them are locked now?”

“If you want to know, there are twenty-eight doors altogether, counting the kitchen doors and the french windows. As to how many of them are locked, I can’t quite tell you. Why? Are you nervous of burglars? How odd!”

Richard threw his cigarette end into the fire and got up.

“Well, I’m going the rounds now to see that they’re locked,” he said. “There are still enough valuables in this house to attract a tramp or a casual thief.”

“There always have been, but the casual thief has never arrived,” she replied. “Before all this crazy business about Basil happened, there were in the house two maids, both arrant cowards who locked themselves into their room every night, a more or less imbecile boy – and Martin. Was I so much safer for their presence? Was the house safer? I fail to see it.”

“Of course you were safer. The mere fact that the house is known to have several people in it is a safeguard,” he retorted, as he strode off into the drawing-room and began to fasten the windows.

Veronica stood still by the fire, listening. She heard Richard’s impatient

progress from room to room, heard him knock against the furniture and swear, heard him slam doors and bang windows down, clang shutters into place, and finally heard his steps recede into the distance on the stone flags of the kitchen quarters, but she still stood there, looking down at the glowing logs. When he came back, she looked at him with the same quizzical amusement.

“All bolted and barred to your satisfaction? How nice! You needn’t have bothered, you know. I always leave a door or two open for Martin. He may come back any time.”

Richard gave a sigh, and ran a hand over his thick dark hair.

“Look here, Ronnie. I’ve said this before and I’ll say it again: if you know where Martin is, the best thing you can do is to persuade him to come back. The very fact of his fading away as he did added a hundred per cent to the police conviction that there’s something more to be explained than has been explained. It’s probably due to Martin’s absence that the Chief Inspector was sent down here. It looks as though Martin did a bolt, and they want to know why.”

Veronica frowned, but she remained stubbornly silent, and Richard went on:

“Look facts in the face, Ronnie. You’ve got plenty of wits, so try to think out how the thing would look to you if you were in the position of a detective. Take these three points: when you ran upstairs that morning you battered on the playroom door calling Martin’s name, as though you had reason to know he was inside – yet only a short while later you told Inspector Long that you had seen Martin climbing Wendle Beacon, at such a time as made it almost impossible for him to have been back in this house at half-past twelve. In addition to that, Martin disappears.” He studied her brooding face and then went on, kindly enough: “Think it out objectively, Ronnie. I know you’re certain that Martin had nothing to do with Basil’s death, but the facts I’ve stated would make any one, detective or not, believe that you knew there was something to be concealed about Martin.”

“They can believe what they choose,” she retorted, “and so can you.”

“Very well. The consequence is that you have a Scotland Yard man haunting the place, intent on running Martin to earth,” went on Richard. “If

you think Martin can be concealed indefinitely you're making a very big mistake"

"What do you mean?" she demanded brusquely. "By saying Martin is 'concealed' are you implying that I'm hiding him?"

Richard heard the rising anger in her voice, but he went on:

"I'm pretty certain that you know where he is, Ronnie, for the simple reason that Martin hasn't the wits to evade the whole police force of the county without assistance from somebody. Of course, I admit that there's a possibility, so far as the actual time-table is concerned, that he reached Southampton or some other port, before the hue and cry was started, and got clear out of the country."

"And why should he have done that?" inquired Veronica. Her voice was ominously quiet now.

Richard sighed. "It's really unnecessary for me to expound," he said. "You can see all the possible implications without my underlining them. If a man does a bolt, he's generally activated by one of two motives. Plain running away from danger, or a desire to safeguard his loot. I've no doubt you've studied the press reports on Basil's – *démarche*. The probability agreed on is that he had a large sum in his possession – which has just disappeared. Of course, he may have burnt his bonds – to parody the usual phrase – in that fire he lighted upstairs: or he may not."

Veronica stood very still, lounging against the stone pillars which supported the vast arch over the hearth.

"If it's to be assumed so easily that Martin is a thief, why not yourself?" she asked fiercely.

"Quite so," replied Richard imperturbably. "If I'd done a bolt, that is exactly what might have been assumed. The fact that I preferred to stay here may be counted in my favour. When a man has nothing to conceal he doesn't bother to make himself scarce. No need to get in a bate about it, Ronnie. You might just as well admit the logic of what I say. Martin's absence looks damned fishy – and if you know where he is, tell him so."

"Thanks for your kind advice," retorted Veronica. "If you have said all you've got to say, I might suggest that there is nothing to detain you here any longer. The village inn will offer you greater comfort than can this house."

Richard chuckled. "I wonder what the Chief Inspector would say if I joined him there at dinner," he replied. "He's an interesting fellow – I shouldn't object to his company by a long chalk – but there's this to it. I'm not prepared to leave you by yourself in the ancestral mansion, Ronnie. It's a bit too steep to think of you sleeping alone here."

"Oh, you sicken me," she cried. "What does it matter to you if I choose to be here by myself? What does it matter to you if I blow my own brains out?"

"It'd matter one hell of a lot," he retorted. "One inquest at a time is enough for the family credit for the moment. Believe me, I've no desire to answer questions concerning you as I've had to answer them about Basil. I'm not trying the sentimental stop, but I wish to the deuce you'd listen to reason, and leave off trying to do the high-falutin' stuff. You won't do yourself – or Martin – any good by flaring out at me. I'm prepared to regard your interests and Martin's as identical, and you're in a fair-sized mess, both of you. You can't rid yourself of a police inquiry by riding a high horse."

There was a moment's dead silence, and then Veronica said:

"If you'd say exactly what you mean, we might come to some sort of understanding before you go. At present I can't make any sense of what you say, except that you're trying the old brotherly tactics of dictating to me – and in that, you're wasting your time."

"My dear Ronnie, haven't I put it plainly enough? I'm out to help you as far as I reasonably can, and if you'd only trust me, I might be able to steer a way through the jam. So far as I can see, there's no reasonable doubt that Basil shot himself – and that before he shot himself he either burnt or disposed of his valuable papers. That was a plain straightforward issue. It's complicated by quite other factors – your behaviour and Martin's. Yours, because you lost your head and went out of your way to fabricate evidence; Martin's, because he lost his head and his nerve simultaneously, and did a bolt. God knows why. I don't."

"How dare you say I fabricated evidence?"

"I know you did," he replied calmly. "I know that you didn't see Martin cross Wendle Down. That's all. Don't interrupt. Now to get on to the business of this second police investigation. They're out after two distinct points. One is: did Basil shoot himself? two is: has any one made off with his missing

papers? The answer to the first is so plain that I don't think it's seriously questioned. Even if Martin had wanted to shoot him – which I very much doubt – there's no conceivable way he could have – achieved the effect”

“And if I had wanted to shoot him?” enquired Veronica's deep voice, and Richard was startled into a jump.

“Well, I think you're capable of a good deal,” he replied coolly, “but subtlety isn't your forte, Ronnie. Besides, damn it all, the thing's a stark staring impossibility. But theft – that's a different story. If Basil did leave a wallet full of securities in his room, there was a chance that somebody made off with them, and that, my dear Ronnie, is where Martin's behaviour comes into question.”

“Why not yours – and mine?” she asked.

“Obviously, we're both suspect,” he retorted impatiently. “That's why it behoves us to behave like reasonable beings – but I'd put the probabilities like this. None of us knew that Basil was going to shoot himself in the playroom. None of us knew that a warrant was out for his arrest. None of us – neither you, nor Martin, nor Paul, nor myself, would have gone to his bedroom and pinched his valuables if we'd thought that Basil was going to discover the theft ten minutes later and proceed to investigate it, but if he left papers worth a fortune in his bedroom (which sounds pretty improbable to me) the time for stealing them was after he was dead. At least, that seems common sense to me.”

“Well?” she asked impatiently, and Richard went on:

“Think it out. There was only a short space of time between the moment when that door was broken in and when Inspector Long had Basil's bedroom door locked and sealed. In the course of that interval your doings can be accounted for fairly thoroughly – taking into account the exact moment at which you put through a call to the police station, the evidence of the maids, and of the chap on duty at the front door. My own doings can be accounted for still more thoroughly, for I was upstairs with Long until I came down to speak to you in the morning-room – though it's conceivable that I might have found time for a dash into Basil's bedroom on my way downstairs – but Martin, he's no cover at all save the one you mistakenly tried to engineer for him. I'm not saying what he did, Ronnie. I'm saying what it's possible he might

have done, and that's what the Chief Inspector is interested in."

"And what does all this lead to?" she demanded scornfully.

"What I said to begin with. Make him show up. If you won't do that, give me a chance to talk to him and get his story fair and square so that he can't muddle himself into half-truths which can be turned against him. The present situation's too idiotic to continue. Something's got to happen, and it'll be one of two things. Either that Martin comes back of his own free will, or that he's run to earth by the C.I.D."

"You're arguing on two assumptions, both quite untenable," she retorted. "The first is that Martin ran away, the second that I know where he is. You're wrong in each respect."

Richard kicked the logs together and sighed. "All right, Ronnie. If you won't trust me, you won't – but you're making a fair-sized ass of yourself."

"Having arrived at your brotherly conclusion, it only remains for me to point out that this is my house, and the sooner you leave it, the better for both of us," she said.

Richard merely shrugged his shoulders.

"I've no doubt you'd like to kick me out, but it's more easily said than done," he replied. "I'm going to stay here until such time as Martin chooses to materialise again, or until Scotland Yard retires to chew its final conclusions – and remember, if you'll only make up your mind to trust me, I might help you – and Martin, too."

She made no reply, but turned away and went upstairs; Richard Mallowood heard her footsteps recede along the creaking boards of the long corridor upstairs, and then heard her bedroom door shut. After that silence reigned in the vast house while he sat and stared into the fire, his face intent and thoughtful.

Richard sat over the fire for an hour or more, listening to the faint creaks in the old house, as the air cooled after the day's sunshine and ancient timber seemed to settle down audibly. The grandfather clock ticked ponderously, the flames lapped against the stone chimney, an occasional squeak and scamper told of rats behind the panelling. It was not until the clock struck eight that Richard rose and stretched himself, and made his way along to the kitchen quarters where he foraged for a meal. Like most travellers – men accustomed

to camping in strange places – he was himself neat and competent in domestic matters, and could cook and serve a meal and wash up dishes with a dexterity which would have put many a servant girl to shame. The sight of the vast kitchen in the Manor House disgusted him, for Veronica seemed to have no sense of orderliness in her composition. Unwashed dishes, fragments of food and half empty cans were left as a happy hunting ground to mice, rats and beetles, and the stone-flagged floors were marred with greasy drops and crumbs. With a grimace of disgust, Richard hunted in the larder, found himself a loaf and some cheese, a bottle of beer and some apples, and carried them to the dining-room because he scorned to eat in the stale smelling, slovenly kitchen. He laughed a little as he set his tray on the great oak dining table – a strange meal to eat in solitude in that superb and sombre room.

“God, what a mess!” he said to himself as he looked at the dusty room and the uncleaned hearth. Under the pile of wood ashes there was still a sullen glow left from the fire he had himself kindled earlier in the day, and with a huge pair of bellows he made it flame again, tossing logs on until the fire roared and spluttered.

On all the previous evenings since they had been alone in the house together Veronica had come and joined him for an evening meal, and they had eaten together with at least some semblance of dignity and sociability, but this evening she did not appear, and Richard ate alone in the great room, gazing sardonically at the family portraits which looked down on him from the panelled walls.

“And a fine lot of blackguards you look, all of you,” he broke out, and was startled by the sound of his own voice when he spoke.

After his meal, having cleared away his dishes with the methodical neatness which always surprised Veronica, Richard went back to the hall, lighted his pipe, and stretched himself out by the fire, enjoying its heat and radiance. He had left open the service doors leading to the kitchens, and he listened to ascertain if Veronica came downstairs to get some supper, but he heard nothing save the characteristic groans and grumblings of the ancient house.

It was between ten and eleven o’clock that he went upstairs to bed, and walked deliberately along the corridor towards Veronica’s room and called out good night. He got no answer, and he drummed on her door with his

knuckles, repeating his words, but still heard no response.

Richard then went to his own room, at the east end of the corridor, having turned off all the lights, and closed his door with a resolute bang.

Once inside, however, he did not go to bed: he changed his leather soled shoes for an old pair with rope soles, took off his tweed coat and donned a seaman's knitted pullover with a rolled collar, put an electric torch in his trousers pocket, and then switched off the light in his room and set the door wide. For more than an hour he sat in the dark, listening intently, and at last was rewarded when he heard the tell-tale boards creak at the end of the corridor farthest from his own.

He went outside, crossed the corridor with two cautious strides and gained the door to the servant's quarters, nearly opposite his own room. He moved swiftly in the dark along the awkward passage, negotiating its turns and unevennesses without hesitation, and descended the service stairs by the simple expedient of sliding down the handrail. The stairway led to a lobby in the maze of passages connecting up kitchens, scullery, still rooms, pantries, dairy, wash-house and other intricacies which formed the service wing of the manor home, and from Richard's point of view his position had one great advantage in the lunatic game of hide and seek he had embarked on – he stood on a stone floor, and stone floors do not creak. Veronica, he judged, would come downstairs: she had the choice of two staircases – the main one or the one which ran by the morning room at the west end of the house. What she would do when she reached the ground floor Richard had no means of knowing, but he had hazarded a guess that she would make for the east wing of the house – the Elizabethan Wing which was now locked off from the main building. Standing in the darkness, listening intently, he heard movements, at last, as the creaking boards betrayed the silent footed walker. He heard the old doors groan on their hinges, and knew that someone was in the kitchen. He recognised the sounds made by someone opening cupboards and drawers, and his eyes caught a glimmer of light reflected down the tortuous passage. The gleam vanished, and his ears told him that someone was now in the dining-room, and he chuckled to himself. Was Veronica merely satisfying her hunger belatedly, having been too proud to eat her supper while he himself was still up and about the house?

Listening intently, he heard the sound of a key turning in its lock, and his quick ears, coupled to his knowledge of the old house, told him that the door which had been opened was that leading from the dining-room to the library and gallery of the Elizabethan wing, which had been kept locked ever since he had been back at home, save when Macdonald had made his inspection of the house. Richard moved forward softly across the stone flags when he heard that door being closed again, but he heard the key being turned on the farther side and a bolt shot home. He went across the dining-room and tried the door to satisfy himself that he had heard aright, and then shot the bolt on his own side of the door. He then went back to the kitchen passage and let himself out by a side door and prowled softly along the wall of the far side of the east wing. There were no doors on this side of the wing, and but few of the windows opened, but Richard had made his own arrangements for gaining admission. He walked past the windows of the library and long gallery until he reached the window of a small powder closet. Stretching up, he slipped the blade of his penknife under the ancient window frame and levered it up until he was able to get his fingers underneath and get a grip on the frame. The little casement came bodily away, for the screws in its hinges had rusted away from the rotten woodwork, and its latch slipped out of the catch when the hinged side was displaced. Richard's strong and dexterous hands lifted it out and down without a sound. He hauled himself up on the sill got his head and shoulders through the small window space, and eventually wriggled himself through into the little dark chamber, reflecting that the additional girth he had acquired since his boyhood's days was a disadvantage when it came to insinuating his shoulders through an Elizabethan window. He moved across to the door of the room, removed a wedge from the door, opened it, and listened. He was now standing on the threshold of a larger room beyond the gallery: in the darkness beside him a small spiral stair ran up to the minstrel's gallery which ran across one end of the long room which had served as the dining-room of the Elizabethan manor: beyond him, farther away from the main building, were the Elizabethan kitchens, long unused, which had been built over the cellars of a medieval monastery. It was in this part of the building, if anywhere, that Richard believed that his brother Martin might be hidden. As boys, Richard and Paul and Basil had spent hours exploring the forbidden cellars and vaults

of Wulfstane, and playing hide and seek among the innumerable turns, intricacies, exits and entrances of that relic of medievalism. Richard knew that he could find half a dozen entrances to the vaults which would never be suspected by the uninitiated searcher, but he knew also that Veronica's acquaintance with the building was much more detailed than his own.

After he had paused for a moment to listen, Richard went on, in complete darkness, across the room with the little spiral, and found an open door at its farther end. His eyes had grown accustomed to the gloom outside, and he knew that the windows here must be shuttered, for he could not make out the rectangle of paler gloom which should have told him where a window was situated: it was solid impenetrable blackness all around him. Moving softly onwards, he felt the smoothness of stone flags beneath his feet again. With his hands touching the panelled walls he moved round towards the entrance to the cellars which he knew to be in the south-east corner of the room, and at last his fingers came on a gap instead of the solid panelling. The cold air coming up from below told its own tale – the old “secret doorway” which he and Basil had found long ago was open now, and his feet felt for the worn stone steps which led downwards. He had taken three cautious steps downwards, his hands touching the stone wall on either side, when something caught against his ankle. He lurched forwards, lost his balance and crashed forwards down the steps, falling from top to bottom and landing with a thud, his head striking the wall below, consciousness leaving him as he landed in a heap, with scarcely time to swear, on the cold dank flag stones of the Wulfstane cellars.

When Richard recovered his senses and sat up painfully his mind was a blank at first. He was in total darkness, stiff and cold, his limbs aching and bruised. Gradually he remembered the activities which had preceded his fall, and swore to himself at his own futility. It was a clear case of biter bitten: he, who had set out to track Veronica, had fallen victim to the simplest of booby traps – a line stretched across the stairs. Picking himself up at last, he found that his fall had left him little the worse save for an aching head and bruised limbs, but he realised that he had given himself away entirely – his fall must have resounded through the building.

He moved round the vault in which he had been lying, moving with cautious, painful footsteps. He found the door which led to the further cellars,

locked and immovable. His torch was broken and he had but little desire to explore further, because he knew that to-night any such activities would prove futile. Richard Mallowood went up the steps again and found – rather to his surprise – that the door at the top was unlocked. When he got back on to the ground floor he discovered that light was shining through the chinks in the shutters and that it was morning. He returned to the inhabited part of the house by the route he had followed when he came out – but his side door which gave on to the kitchen regions was locked.

It was cold in the early dawn: frost lay on the grass and white mist wreathed the woods. Richard Mallowood alternately shivered and swore. He remembered how carefully he had locked all the other doors last night, shuttered the windows and made the place secure. Veronica was inside, doubtless – undisputed mistress of her own domain.

It was two hours later that Peter Vernon, looking out of the front door of the Mallowood Arms, conscious of an enchanting odour of grilled bacon and kidneys, and the rare aroma of good coffee behind him, saw Richard Mallowood approaching the inn, still in his blue seaman's jersey. With a glance at Richard's face Vernon said:

“Good morning. You look as though you've had a spill.”

Richard smiled, quite amiably.

“I have an' all. Bird's nesting. That coffee smells good.”

“It is good – quite unusually so. You're a rash man to go bird's nesting in October.”

“I have an antipodean mind,” said Richard cheerfully. “I like the smell of that bacon. I'm coming to have some. My wife can't cook bacon.”

“The moral is – remain single,” replied Vernon gravely, and Richard Mallowood threw back his head and laughed as though at a very good joke.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

IN his room at Scotland Yard, Macdonald had just finished a conversation on the trans-continental telephone. He had been talking to a colleague in the “Special” branch whose duties involved liaison work with the police organisations of France and Spain and his head buzzed a little with the effort of hearing and of making himself understood. A sergeant standing by was waiting for him with a message from the Assistant Commissioner, Colonel Wragley, to the effect that the latter wished to talk to him as soon as he (Macdonald) had finished telephoning.

The Chief Inspector made his way to the A.C.’s room in a thoughtful frame of mind: Macdonald himself was the most patient of men and he often found Colonel Wragley’s impatient nature exasperating – as the Colonel, in his turn, found Macdonald’s native cautiousness exasperating. The fact was that Macdonald hated to put a theory into words until he had solid evidence to support a “hunch.” He had often seen his way through a case long before he had amassed the evidence which gave substance to his ideas. Macdonald was a “good guesser,” but there was something in his shrewd Scots mind which made him unwilling to share his guesses while they existed only as surmise.

Colonel Wragley greeted the Chief Inspector with a characteristic question, breezily uttered:

“Well, Macdonald? Arrived at any conclusion in this Mallowood case yet? This latest news about clinches things to my mind.”

“You are referring to the report of Paul Mallowood’s death, sir?”

“Obviously,” retorted the other. “Here is the chain of events, as I see them. Paul Mallowood, the only substantially wealthy member of the family, leaves England after a farewell visit to his family, during which he probably gave them chapter and verse concerning his forthcoming tour. After Paul’s departure, two things happen: the youngest brother, Martin, disappears, and

Basil, in possession of a small fortune in the form of negotiable securities, shoots himself, and his loot vanishes. I've been studying your notes on the family and the house they live in, Macdonald – a very interesting report, too. It's abundantly clear which parties are in need of money – the sister, Veronica, and her twin, Martin. I should say that they hatched out a plan between them whereby Martin followed on Paul's heels to Tunis, knowing in advance where Paul was going to stay, and Martin killed him when he got the opportunity. It's plain enough that it's easier to kill a man in Tunis than in England, and get away with it. They're a savage lot out there – dagoes, natives, and the whole lot. Stabbing affrays are common enough there, and investigation of them uncommonly casual. In support of this, take the sister's evidence about Martin's wandering habits and loss of memory. Very unconvincing, Macdonald. Obviously, a put-up explanation, carefully prepared in advance. It seems plain enough from your notes, also, that Veronica and Martin hated Paul, and may well have been watching for an opportunity to kill him. They're a queer pair, if I've read your evidence aright."

"I agree with you that they are a queer pair, sir; the whole family seems to be a bit abnormal, no matter what standard you judge them by. It is also very obvious that Veronica and Martin were in need of money to enable them to go on living at the Manor, let alone to keep it in any sort of repair – but I fail to see how they could have been certain that Paul Mallowood's death would benefit them financially. Judging by the relationship assumed to exist between them, there seemed to be no probability that Paul would have bequeathed his fortune to them. Of course we have no knowledge of the contents of his will at present, but I should think it might be safely assumed that Veronica and Martin had no knowledge of it either. On the other hand, I agree with you that there was the motive of hatred. The whole story is exceedingly involved."

He paused a moment and then continued: "Your theory assumes that Basil's suicide was a fortuitous coincidence, having no connection with Paul's death?"

Colonel Wragley retorted rather sharply. "So far as I can gather, Macdonald, your own investigation has in no way disproved any portion of Long's report, or of the evidence put forward at the coroner's inquest?"

"The evidence was all sound, sir. The door of the room in which deceased

was found was locked, and could only have been locked from inside. Deceased had only been dead a few minutes when his body was found, and the letter left on the table, written certainly only a few hours previous to its examination, was in Basil Mallowood's handwriting. Any reconsideration of the jury's verdict will have to explain away all those points."

"Also the fingerprints on the letter and those on deceased's toilet articles were identical – the fingerprints of deceased in short? You have found no inconsistencies there?"

"No, sir, none – but there is this peculiarity, in the case. Basil Mallowood went to a great deal of trouble to make sure that none of his own fingerprints could be found either at his flat in Manchester Crescent or at his office in the city. He had destroyed his private papers systematically. His office safe was empty and its handle and shelves bare of prints. Similarly with the drawers of his desk. He had overlooked nothing. Of course the ledgers he had examined and used, and quantities of papers later examined by the auditors were there, but all of these had had their prints confused or superimposed during the actual audit, when they were worked over extensively. Then there is the evidence at Varley Close to be taken into consideration. It seems overwhelmingly probable that Basil Mallowood made his home there, at any rate at week-ends – but we have found no fingerprints there which tally with any others filed in this case. So far as fingerprints are concerned, we have very little chance – to date – of corroborating any theory at all – save in the instances at Wulfstane which you have mentioned. Now to turn to the evidence of Paul Mallowood's death. A man's body was found in the native quarter of Tunis. The body was dressed in Paul Mallowood's clothes, and his papers, passport and so on were in the pockets of those clothes. The body had certainly been moved – possibly more than once – from the place at which the stabbing occurred. It had at some time been immersed in a tank. Both hands had been severed at the wrists and the face made unidentifiable. In short, the statement that the body is Paul Mallowood's rests on the fact it was dressed in his clothes and carried some of his papers. As was to be expected, the pockets had been looted of all valuables – purse, note wallet, watch, letters of credit and so forth. His passport was still in an inner pocket, and a few trivial possessions, such as cigarette holder, pocket comb and mirror, handkerchief

and an empty case which had contained rail and plane vouchers from Cook's. The measurements of the body are substantially those of Paul Mallowood, so far as our evidence goes, but there is no irrefutable evidence that the body is his. In short, the discovery of it simply adds to the complexity of the case. I could put forward a dozen fantastic theories on the evidence we have collected to date."

"Good Gad!" Colonel Wragley looked at Macdonald with an air of absolute consternation. He was then silent for a moment, digesting the implications arising from the facts which Macdonald had culled from his long distance telephone call. At length the Assistant Commissioner demanded:

"Do you mean to say that you're assuming that the body found in Tunis is not Paul Mallowood's body, Macdonald?"

"I'm not assuming anything, sir. I'm only stating that we have no absolute proof that the body is his. It may be. It may not."

"And have you examined the implications in the latter case?" demanded Wragley. "A body clothed in Paul Mallowood's garments, with his passport in the pocket – there are only two possible explanations: Either Paul Mallowood has been murdered, or else he has murdered somebody else in order to give the impression that he himself is dead."

"Yes, sir. I think those alternatives cover the ground," replied Macdonald, in his maddeningly quiet way. The gleam of humour in his grey eyes was not perceived by Wragley, who always quoted the Scots as being a nation devoid of humour. Macdonald went on:

"The point which we have to decide, sir, is which interpretation will be most favourable for our investigation."

"What the devil do you mean?" asked Wragley, and Macdonald went on:

"I want to get at Paul Mallowood's papers and personal possessions. Before he went away he had his flat stripped in order that the decorators might get on with their work in his absence. His papers and valuables are in safe deposit somewhere. Previous to this report of his death we had no reason to demand an examination of his effects. The evidence all went to prove that Paul Mallowood could not have been concerned in the shooting of his brother, or in making off with Basil's effects, because there was ample evidence to prove that when Paul left the country, Basil was still alive. Paul's solicitor and his

fellow directors were well aware of this, and would have resisted any attempt at examination of Paul's effects without sufficient evidence to justify such a move."

"Yes, yes – I saw all that. There was no reason at all to suppose that Paul was involved," said Wragley. "I considered all the evidence in detail. It was the time of Basil's death which precluded any fantastic theories concerning the two brothers. One of them left Croydon by the 10.00 o'clock plane and the other was still alive two hours later." Wragley pointed a minatory finger at Macdonald. "There's no going back on that point, I take it? No possibility of a mistake in the actual time of death?"

"None whatever," replied Macdonald patiently. "In the midst of a welter of uncertainties we can be sure of that one point – but this report of Paul Mallowood's death puts us in an easier position. His solicitor has no longer a client's interests to protect. Assumption of death – especially death by violence – calls for immediate examination of deceased's effects."

"Then get on with it," said Wragley, and Macdonald nodded.

"Yes, sir, but it's worth while thinking out any difficulties which may arise, and I should like to state my own personal opinion here, for what it's worth. Basil Mallowood's roguery has been proved up to the hilt. Paul has the reputation of a man of integrity. Personally I should not be at all surprised if it be proved that certain of Paul's transactions were of such a nature that disclosure of them would not be advantageous to the reputation of the company whose director he was. I have seen Mr. Lathom – Paul Mallowood's fellow director – and I have learnt a little about his solicitor, a man named Sootland. I believe that both of them will be anxious to prevent an examination of Paul Mallowood's effects unless they are convinced of his death. They are both of them astute enough to see that the evidence of his death is not convincing. It is more than probable that they are having investigations made for themselves in Tunis. I want the co-operation of those two men, Sootland and Lathom. A search warrant is a futile weapon if the evidence it aims at collecting is destroyed before the warrant becomes operative."

Wragley sat and pondered. "Damn it, Macdonald! It takes a tortuous mind like yours to appreciate all the possibilities of this infernal case," he said.

“What do you expect to find when you execute the warrant?”

“I shan’t be surprised to learn that Paul Mallowood left no will, that his solicitor holds no private papers of his, that his bank holds nothing but securities such as share certificates – possibly not many of those – and that the address of his safe deposit is unknown. We can discover the latter – provided that Paul was an honest man – by advertising, but that will hold us up.”

Wragley began to laugh. “I’m beginning to see what you meant by saying that you could provide a dozen different explanations of this case,” he said. “If Paul is what you are assuming him to be, it’s possible that he was in league with Basil after all, or that Paul made off with Basil’s missing property. Look here, Macdonald, this fellow, Martin. Any chance that he could have been made up to pass for either of his brothers – Paul or Basil?”

“I shouldn’t think so,” replied Macdonald, “Martin is described as exceedingly thin, with a very lean face and eyes deep set in hollow sockets. He is also fair headed. You are thinking of the possibility that Martin took Paul’s place on the plane. It won’t work, sir. The Mallowood who left on the plane weighed thirteen stone twelve. They weighed him at the air port. Martin weighs just under ten stone according to his doctor – it wouldn’t be easy to carry an extra four stone on a man’s person, especially in the case of a weakling like Martin.”

Again Wragley chuckled. “Ah, but you thought of the same thing yourself, Macdonald?”

“I’ve thought of every possible – and impossible – variation of the theme of the Mallowood brothers, sir. It is a tempting thought to assume that Paul Mallowood did not travel on the plane he was supposed to have travelled on, but if so, then his place was taken by somebody who resembled him closely enough to take in the passport officials who scrutinised him and his photographs. Obviously one’s thoughts turn to his brothers – but one can get no further. Basil could not have gone on the plane and yet be shot at Wulfstane. Richard could not have deputised, nor yet Veronica – and for Martin to have passed himself off for Paul seems a total impossibility. I also wondered if it could have been Martin who was shot, leaving both Paul and Basil at large, but again the physical dissimilarity was too marked.”

“It’s a curious situation, Macdonald. Basil shot, Paul stabbed, Martin

disappeared. Richard and Veronica remaining.”

Macdonald chuckled. “One could say, with less chance of error, that Basil may have been shot, Paul may have been stabbed – but it’s difficult to arrive at any certainty. And now, sir, as to present arrangements. Walsh, of the Special Branch, is investigating in Tunis. He’s a very able fellow, and I’ve put him in touch with all the relevant facts to assist him in the inquiries which we want made. I have got a man in the G.P.O. investigating any cables or telegrams which may have been delivered at Alvarley, Mrs. Brownleigh’s house in Hendon. I’m hoping that we may get some information that way. It’s possible that there was some communication between the Mallowood brothers which may give us a lead in the right direction. I want to get into touch with Mr. Sootland, Paul’s solicitor, myself, and then to return to Wulfstane. I think the core of the secret is there.”

“Well, I’ve put you in charge, and it’s up to you to choose your own methods, Macdonald. It’s a damned harassing case. I don’t see how you’ll ever get it straightened out. Even if it’s established that this body they’ve got in Tunis isn’t Paul’s body at all, and Walsh runs Paul to earth, you can’t charge the latter with shooting Basil at 12.30 if Paul can prove he was at Le Bourget Aerodrome at 12.30. It still seems more probable to me that Martin’s at the bottom of it, with the assistance of Veronica.”

For a moment, Colonel Wragley sat considering, with upraised finger, obviously about to embark on a further disquisition, and at length he went on: “In every case one has a modicum of hard fact which has to control one’s theorising. In this case we have one man shot at Wulfstane Manor (and suicide or not doesn’t alter the fact of his presence there) and another travelling in the 10.0 o’clock plane. As you say, neither Veronica or Richard could have been in the plane: we’re left with Paul or Martin, and you say it couldn’t have been Martin. Very well: Basil shoots himself at Wulfstane: Paul is in the plane: Martin’s whereabouts unknown: Veronica at Wulfstane. In the matter of Paul’s death – presumed – in Tunis – Basil’s dead, Veronica and Richard are at Wulfstane, Martin’s whereabouts unknown. Again, the simplest explanation may be the right one. Martin may have killed Paul. Obviously Richard didn’t, and once again, Veronica and Martin wanted the money. I can’t see that Paul had sufficient incentive to kill Basil for his money. Paul had plenty of his own.

If Paul had killed Veronica or Martin that would have been understandable. Moreover, on the evidence as it stands, I don't see that there is any chance of the suicide verdict being reversed. No jury would believe that Basil's death could be other than suicide on the evidence presented."

He paused and studied Macdonald thoughtfully, "Are we imagining that things are more complex than is actually the case, Macdonald? Basil Mallowood's death seemed a plain case of suicide save for two factors, one being Martin's disappearance, the other the non-existence of the funds presumed to have been in Basil's possession. It seems to me that Martin's absence may well be explained by Paul's death – in which case I should expect Martin to put in an appearance again shortly, doubtless with every appearance of recovering from an attack of loss of memory."

"It may be that I am exaggerating the complexities of the business, sir, but it seemed to me, as it seemed to Long, that the solution must either be very simple or else very involved – and I take the latter view myself. However, another forty-eight hours ought to elucidate things considerably. We shall have more evidence from Tunis, and I shall have had time to examine Paul Mallowood's papers. Then there's the matter of Martin. If your theory is right he will want to put in an appearance again as soon as possible – and if he re-enters the country I don't think he will succeed in doing so unobserved."

Wragley looked down at Macdonald's report. "I see that you have a theory that Martin may be hidden at Wulfstane, Macdonald. I can't imagine why you haven't had the place properly searched."

"In my opinion, sir, it's impossible to search that house properly – in such a way as to leave no possibility of omission – in less than a month. It would mean stripping panelling, probing walls, earthing up exits and generally investigating the structure on a large scale – and I'm pretty sure we should defeat our own ends by doing it. If Martin is alive, and hidden in that house, he's behaving in a manner so abnormal that he would probably shoot himself if he were cornered. I want to get the evidence and proclaim it aloud before I take a search party into the vaults at Wulfstane. I have put down all the relevant facts in my report. There are several interpretations to be placed on them at present, but I think that we can narrow the issue quite shortly – and then search Wulfstane."

Colonel Wragley sat and considered for a moment. Then he said:

“I am in agreement with you that immediate investigation into Paul Mallowood’s affairs is indicated. As to the possibility of Martin shooting himself, I think that’s a bit far fetched.”

“He is obviously a neurotic type, sir. How far he is concerned in this problem I am unable to decide, but from what I have heard of him, both from his sister and his doctor, it is plain that he is an unstable type. I want his evidence, and in order to be certain of getting it, I don’t want to rush in and defeat my own ends.”

“In other words, you want a free hand to continue the case in your own way,” chuckled Wragley. “I’ll admit that we haven’t been the losers when you’ve had your way on previous occasions, so you can carry on according to your own notions. In any case, you need to get this business about Paul settled first.”

“Yes, sir,” replied Macdonald, and removed himself from the A.C.’s presence before the latter changed his mind and issued any further specific instructions. Macdonald was feeling his way through an intricate case, and wanted to be left free to follow a hunch. He had put all the evidence he had collected before his superior officer: it was not Macdonald’s intention at the moment to put on record his own theoretical interpretation of that evidence.

CHAPTER TWELVE

WHEN Macdonald left Colonel Wragley he went on immediately to see Mr. Josiah Sootland in the latter's office in Bedford Row. The lawyer was a man of sixty, grey of hair, pallid of skin, with bushy grey eyebrows above light grey eyes, whose gaze was difficult to meet on account of the extreme convexity of his gold-rimmed glasses. He was just the type of man Macdonald had anticipated, sparing of words, without a gleam of geniality or humanity about him – a veritable “safe deposit” of a man, as cold and unpromising in exterior as one of his own metal deed boxes.

Macdonald, having sent in an official card which brought him prompt access to the principal's presence, sat down opposite Mr. Sootland, saying:

“You are Mr. Paul Mallowood's lawyer, sir?”

“Yes. That is to say on the occasions when Mr. Mallowood has required legal advice – mainly on matters of company law – he has applied to my firm for that advice.”

“You have seen the report of Mr. Mallowood's death, sir?”

“I have been informed of the statement made in the evening papers. I have no other information.”

“My department has been in touch with a member of the C.I.D. now in Tunis. There is a question about the identity of deceased which must be cleared up. Identification was not possible in the usual way, the face of the corpse having been mutilated. To put the matter briefly, I want to obtain copies of Mr. Mallowood's fingerprints. These should be easily obtainable from his papers. Presumably you have his deed box?”

“Presumption is a poor guide, Chief Inspector. Mr. Mallowood's deed box was removed by him from my keeping before he left England. I understand that his papers, in common with his valuables, are in safe deposit. They are not here.”

“Can you give me any reason why he should thus have removed his deed box from your keeping, sir?”

“Doubtless for greater safety, Chief Inspector,” replied the lawyer dryly. “In the present uncertain state of affairs no building of this type can be accounted safe.”

“Have you a copy of his will, sir?”

“No. To the best of my knowledge, there is no such document in existence. Mr. Mallowood made a will about ten years ago, but he destroyed it some months ago, intending to make other disposition of his property. He gave no further directions to my firm on this point.”

There was a pause, while Macdonald studied the lawyer’s face, and at length the former asked:

“Am I to understand, sir, that you have no papers of any kind of Mr. Mallowood’s in your keeping?”

“That is so, Chief Inspector. I have, of course, a signed receipt for his deed box. A clerk was sent to fetch it, following written instructions concerning it. I can give you those letters for examination.” The lawyer paused, and then added, “I do not mind telling you in confidence that Mr. Mallowood had a difference of opinion with me concerning certain litigation which he wished to set on foot. My advice to him was contrary to his own wishes. It is possible – though no statement was made to that effect – that he intended to entrust his interests to another firm.”

“What was the nature of the litigation in question, sir?”

“Nothing relevant to your business, Chief Inspector. It involved a dispute over building rights on a certain property which Mr. Mallowood had purchased.”

Macdonald smiled, “As a lawyer of caution and experience you advised settling out of court, and Mr. Mallowood, as a man of quick temper and overbearing mind, wished to fight in the law courts?”

“That was the position, roughly speaking, though it can be of no interest to Scotland Yard.”

“I wish you would give me an opinion in confidence, sir, on certain evidence which I will put before you, also in confidence. When Mr. Mallowood went abroad, he had his flat dismantled, and given over to the decorators. He

removed his deed box from your keeping. He also removed all his private papers from his city office. His bank holds share certificates and similar securities, but all his private belongings were placed in safe deposit, the keys of which were handed to him personally, with the combination of the lock which covers them. It is not going to be easy to get that vault opened. The whole system of the safe deposit company in question involves the presence of the depositor with his own keys in order to gain access. There were no keys on the body found in Tunis, neither has Mr. Mallowood's baggage been recovered. It is a curious situation. He took two suitcases with him from Wulfstane Manor: one of these went with him on the plane: the other has disappeared. His bigger baggage was dispatched to Tunis earlier and was recovered by an agent from the shipping company, the agent giving up the appropriate vouchers. It is not known where Mr. Mallowood stayed in Tunis, but it was not at the hotel where reservations were made for him. What interpretation would you put on those facts?"

The lawyer sat very still, and at length said, "I have no opinion to give which could be of any value to you, Chief Inspector. Your facts are susceptible to various curious interpretations. I can only tell you that in my experience of him I have found Mr. Mallowood a man of integrity: hasty in judgment at rare moments, perhaps, but as a rule, a man of cool and balanced mind."

"Given to occasional outbursts of temper when his judgment was liable to be at fault? In short, a man of able, calculating disposition, prone to rage when crossed, and also a man of very suspicious temperament?"

"I do not make a study of psychology, Chief Inspector, but I think that your analysis is not at fault. I regret that I have no means of helping you in your present search. I can only suggest that you set the machinery of the law in motion to get the vault of the safe deposit opened."

For the only time in the interview a gleam of amusement flashed across the lawyer's face.

"It is a nice position," he said meditatively. "You have presumption of death, but no proof: you have no charge to prefer against Mr. Paul Mallowood, and I give it as my opinion that the lawyers of the safe deposit company will be anxious to protect their client's interests – until death be proved. A search warrant will not be easy to apply in this matter."

“It can be applied all right – but there may be delay in the process,” said Macdonald. “Now, sir, assuming that Mr. Paul Mallowood died intestate, am I right in assuming that his estate will be divided among his next of kin?”

“That is so – his remaining brothers and his sister.”

“The more the merrier – but the fewer the better fare,” said Macdonald. “You will have followed the Basil Mallowood case, sir?”

“To some extent. Happily my practice is not often concerned with the criminal code. You have an interesting case in hand, Chief Inspector, but I know of nothing which can assist you.”

“You can give no information concerning Mr. Paul Mallowood’s private life?”

“I have no information about it at all. My knowledge of him covers nothing but business dealings, all strictly in conformity with law and custom.”

Macdonald left the lawyer’s office with the only papers which Mr. Sootland could give him – the typewritten letter and receipt concerning the removal of the deed box. These were despatched to Scotland Yard for examination. From Bedford Row Macdonald went on to the city where he saw Mr. Bernard Lathom, who had been busy convening his “extraordinary meeting,” since it now appeared desirable to him to announce Mr. Paul Mallowood’s resignation from his directorship. Macdonald collected certain papers from Paul Mallowood’s desk and files, and asked for the loan of the latter’s confidential clerk – an astute young man named John Barberry. Macdonald wished to take the latter to Croydon to see the air port officials who had seen Paul Mallowood on to the plane when he left England. John Barberry was perfectly willing to talk. Once clear of the office, and removed from the gaze of Mr. Lathom’s forbidding eyes, the clerk opened out and chattered away volubly.

“Is he really dead, sir?” was John Barberry’s first sentence, when he was seated beside Macdonald in the latter’s car.

“Mr. Paul Mallowood? To the best of my belief, yes,” replied Macdonald. “In any case, you needn’t be afraid that anything you say to me will be repeated to your firm, if that’s what is in your mind.”

“Well, it’s true I don’t want to get the sack, decent jobs being hard to come by,” replied the young man, “and it wouldn’t seem out of character for Mr. Mallowood to allow a report of his death to get around – and then to turn up

again very much alive – like the way he used to say he was going away for a week and then coming back a couple of days later and nosing round. Funny, he was just born suspicious. It was in his blood. I knew a chap who was in Basil Mallowood's office at one time, and Basil was just the same – always suspicious.”

“Presumably Basil had his reasons for being suspicious,” said Macdonald. “He must have had some sleepless nights wondering when he'd be bowled out. The reckoning was bound to come.”

“They say he was infernally clever, though,” said the clerk. “He'd cooked the books so that an average auditor didn't spot any discrepancies. I've wondered time and again if our Paul didn't play any tricks of the same kind. Mr. Lathom thought so, too, though he wouldn't admit it to any one. He's been working all night with the auditors, going into every tiny detail.”

“Now I want you to think a bit about this job you're out to do for me,” said Macdonald. ” According to the evidence, Mr. Paul Mallowood left Croydon by the 10.0 o'clock plane last Wednesday. I want you to talk to the passport official, the porter, steward, and any one else who's concerned, and see if you can spot any discrepancies between the Paul Mallowood who left by plane and the man you've worked for in the office. Keep quiet and think for a bit. It's not going to be easy, but you might think of something helpful.”

They were silent as Macdonald drove the car through the South London traffic, and it was a quarter of an hour later that John Barberry spoke again.

“I've thought of a few things,” he said. “He pinched his finger in the safe a few days before he left and his nail was turning black – the middle finger of his right hand. He'd got a mark – a birth mark I suppose – below his right ear. A sort of coffee-coloured patch. Also he'd got a cough – kind of chronic catarrh, really. He always coughed before he spoke. When he paid for anything, he used to chuck the money down. If it was notes he paid in he'd sort of flick it at you: if it was cash, he'd toss it down, all lordly like if you know what I mean. I've never know him to put money down quietly, like other chaps do. He always seemed to chuck it at you – and he always waited for his exact change and counted it carefully. He's sent me out to get things sometimes – papers or books or cigarettes – and if it was a sixpence he'd given he'd always count the coppers – suspicious again. That's why I believe he wasn't above doing other

people, because he always expected to be done himself.”

“Those are all good points you’ve thought of,” said Macdonald, “but it seems as though you didn’t like him overmuch.”

“Me? I loathe him. All the fellows in the office do. He was bad tempered, high handed and suspicious, and he’d got a nasty tongue. Sarcastic. Never could stand sarcasm. If he’s got himself done in, I expect he earned it. I don’t know who’s going to weep over him, but I know I’m not.”

Macdonald was both amused and interested to see the way that John Barberry tackled his job with the aerodrome personnel who had seen Paul Mallowood embark on the plane, and the steward who had served him en route. The clerk managed to elicit identifying facts without showing his own hand. He got the steward to state that Mr. Mallowood had had a piece of sticking plaster round the middle finger of his right hand, that he had a brown stain – a noticeable mark – below his right ear: that he had a cough, but not an ordinary sniffley cold: that he drank “Johnnie Walker” whisky and refused Black & White, and finally – a statement which surprised Barberry, that he was a generous tipper. The steward – an intelligent fellow – also mentioned the manner in which Paul Mallowood flicked a pound note at him, but he remembered him best as a generous tipper – an open-handed gentleman, as he put it. The steward then went on to say that he had seen Paul Mallowood on a previous trip, though he could not be certain of the date, but he could swear to his identity. On the previous flight, he averred, Mr. Mallowood had left an envelope at the side of his seat; it had been an empty envelope, but it had had the name Paul Mallowood typed on it, and the name had recurred to the steward’s memory immediately when Scotland Yard had instituted inquiries in the present case.

The baggage man and the passport officer added their quota of description, all of which went to reinforce the seemingly inevitable assumption that Paul Mallowood, complete with birthmark, cough, and damaged fingertip, had left Croydon by plane two and a half hours before Basil had been shot at Wulfstane. Macdonald had small doubts that equally clear evidence would show that Paul had changed planes at Lisbon, and had duly arrived at Tunis.

Pondering over these facts, Macdonald sent John Barberry back to London while he himself interviewed the airport authorities, asking them to search

their records to find any previous occasions when Paul Mallowood had travelled by plane from Croydon. This done he returned to Scotland Yard to see if any results had been achieved in the inquiries at the post office concerning cables delivered at Alvarley. In his own mind, Macdonald was very sceptical about the report of Paul Mallowood's body having been discovered in Tunis. While it was possible to make more than one interpretation of the facts in this tangled case, it seemed to Macdonald that the assumption that Paul Mallowood had been killed in Tunis might be valuable to the plotters in any case. If Paul's death in Tunis was accepted as a fact, one avenue of inquiry might be regarded as closed – but Macdonald did not intend to accept that closure. He had put Walsh, who was working in Tunis, in full possession of such facts as seemed relevant, and he was leaving him to continue the investigation there. Meantime, Macdonald very much wanted to know if any continental cables or long distance telephone calls had been put through to Alvarley, since it seemed to him that that house might have been used as a convenient spot for the interchange of communications. Whatever the explanation underlying the facts of the Wulfstane case – and Macdonald had quite discarded any idea that the explanation could be a simple one, dictated by face values – the C.I.D. man believed that a considerable amount of planning had prefaced the action. As Macdonald saw it, this business of a body found clad in Paul Mallowood's clothes was no simple business of the murder of a rash foreigner prompted by profit for the benefit of some Tunisian cut-throat, but a step in an elaborate plot centred around the shooting tragedy at Wulfstane. Wherever Paul Mallowood might be, Macdonald did not believe that he had been killed in Tunis, but Macdonald did believe that the plotters had hoped that that simple explanation would be accepted.

Enquiries had already been made at Wulfstane post office, and it was certain that neither foreign cables nor long distance telephone calls had been received at the Manor. It was obviously possible that such communications could have been sent to either Paul or Basil Mallowood's town addresses or offices, but Macdonald argued that it would have been realised in advance that enquiries would be made at all these destinations. It was only by sheer good luck that Alvarley had been discovered, and that address might well have been considered a safe quarter for communications.

When Macdonald arrived at Scotland Yard he found the information he had wanted awaiting him. A Hendon post office had transmitted two cables to a firm in Tunis, one sent off six weeks ago, one a fortnight ago. The name and address of the sender was Brownleigh, Alvarley, Varley Close. The first message ran, "Goods to be transmitted mid October." The second one, "Goods will be forwarded Wednesday, October 10th, Awaiting further instructions." As Macdonald read these messages, he was aware of a thrill of excitement pulsing through him. He always found that the most exciting moments in a case were not those of violent action, not even those culminating moments immediately preceding an arrest, but the times when he came aware that he had read aright the evidence he had studied, when he obtained confirmation that his mind had made contact, so to speak, with a mind which had plotted a crime.

The next step was to pass on the address of the Tunis firm to Walsh, and it was when this had been arranged that Macdonald was told that Peter Vernon was asking to see him. The journalist was bidden to come up to Macdonald's room, and the latter greeted him with:

"Hullo, Peter. Come fishing, or complete with solution?"

Vernon grinned. "Neither. I've got one or two oddments to tell you. I hear Paul Mallowood's body has been found."

"So I'm told. They seem an unfortunate family."

"Umps... Have you also heard that Martin Mallowood's been seen prowling in the woods below the park at Wulfstane?"

Macdonald cocked an eye at the other.

"Who by? You?"

"No, laddie. By one of the farm hands at Willow Farm, Bidden by name. Bidden says he saw Martin strolling through Long Wood at dusk two days ago. He was frightened, was Bidden. Not sure if he'd seen a ghost. Didn't your men down there get to hear of it?"

"They did not. You seem to have a confidence evoking nature in the local bars. Out with it."

"It's a humorous story. I've often been taken for a fool, but never before for a spook. Bidden saw me in Long Wood. Seemingly I'm Martin's height and build: I'd got a blue muffler round my neck with the ends flying – seems

Martin's got a similar one he wears that way, and it was more than half dark. Any way, I know for a fact that I was at the very spot at the time Bidden says he saw Martin."

"So much for visual evidence," said Macdonald. "The more often Bidden repeats that story, the more convinced will he be that he saw Martin – or Martin's ghost. Go on. You haven't finished your story yet. Incidentally, I'm glad you're here – and not your ghost. It isn't healthy to be mistaken for a Mallowood brother these days."

Vernon broke out laughing. "It certainly isn't. Well, I gave the story twenty-four hours to get round. Marvellous how the news seeps round in the country, though the police are often the last to hear it. I thought I'd come and tell you about it, in case it might be useful." He regarded Macdonald quizzically, his shrewd blue eyes studying the detective thoughtfully:

"You're damn careful not to give away your own ideas in this case, Jock, but it seems to me there's some queer doings afoot in that crazy Mallowood family. Basil shot at Wulfstane, Paul reported dead in Tunis. Martin off the map. Veronica living alone in that fantastic great house. Richard staying at the Inn. You heard how he turned up one morning, looking as though he'd been in a bonny scrap? His luggage was sent down by the gardener later in the day. He spends his time fishing and mooching around. Told me he was fed up with a house without servants, where he had to organise his own commissariat. Personally I believe he got wind-up – found his sister a spot too enlivening in the way of company."

Macdonald sat and pondered for a moment, and Vernon went on:

"What's the possibility that Paul, having organised his own death in Tunis, has come back to England to organise the finale of the story? If that notion's got anything in it, it's a poor look out for Martin and Veronica."

"I don't see that that notion would work," said Macdonald. "If Paul gets his death presumed, he can't come back and claim Wulfstane, even though he succeeded in wiping out the rest of the family."

"Oh, he'll buzz up again in Tunis or Morocco or Egypt, with some fine story of being held to ransom, and escaping from savage tribes. Afridis, Moors, Berbers, heretics and infidels. There are lots of variations you could work out along that theme."

Macdonald chuckled. "You've been using your imagination, laddy."

Vernon nodded cheerfully. "Haven't you? I fail to see how you're to get even with this case if you don't apply a little imagination. If you accept the facts you're faced with Basil as a straightforward suicide, and Paul as a victim of assassination in Tunis."

"You've rather veered away from your original theory that Veronica was responsible for the situation."

Vernon rubbed his head thoughtfully. "Whatever Veronica may or may not have done, she can't have organised Paul's death in Tunis."

"So you're toying with the theory that Paul may be organising her death in England, while he has arranged an original sort of alibi for himself by leaving a corpse labelled with his own name."

"Nothing's impossible with a family like these Mallowoods," said Vernon. "Look here, Jock. If Paul is anywhere around at Wulfstane these days, and gets to know that his brother Martin is taking strolls in Long Wood in the gloaming, something may happen."

"Something may, so I advise you not to try that little game on, Peter. If I want you to play the decoy, I'll tell you so, but until you're given instructions, keep away. Got that?"

"Ha, ha! Got a rise at last!" chuckled Vernon. "Then you do believe that something else may happen at Wulfstane?"

"Something's bound to happen," said Macdonald, "but it's not for you to precipitate it. Stay away for the time being, Peter. I'm going down there again myself – and if I want you to lend a hand I'll tell you so."

"In other words, don't butt in," grinned Vernon. "All right. I'm always willing to take orders, but tell me this. What's the object of keeping men on duty in the park at Wulfstane, where they're too far away from the house to keep an eye on it, and where they're concentrating on watching a ruined bit of monastic building that almost certainly isn't connected with the Wulfstane cellars?"

"Well, if you can't see the notion underlying their presence at that improbable spot, far be it from me to enlighten you," said Macdonald.

"Meaning that your men are posted at a distance to give Veronica – and-or Martin, Paul and company – confidence that the house itself is unwatched?"

They're to feel they know what to avoid and so be unprepared when the house itself is searched?" asked Vernon.

And Macdonald did not contradict him.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

IT was the night after Macdonald had met Peter Vernon at Scotland Yard: a still, cold night, in which stars blazed in a clear sky and the earth was crisp and hard in the grip of the first heavy frost of the year. The intense cold had laid hold of Wulfstane Manor, creeping through its vast rooms, its stone-flagged kitchens and shadowy corridors. The old house was deadly cold, all save the inglenook in the great hall, where logs smouldered day in, day out, and a glow could be coaxed from the pile of wood ashes at any hour of the day or night.

It was close on midnight when Veronica Mallowood came downstairs. In all the chequered history of the ancient manor house, no stranger sight than Veronica could have been seen as she came silently downstairs. She was wrapped in an ancient sable cloak, its rich folds hanging magnificently from her broad shoulders to the ground. The fur was so old and rotten that it tore at a touch, but it was warm, and even in its old age, still beautiful. With a lighted candle in her hand she came silently down the state staircase, the candle light flickering in the cold air, throwing strange long shadows and stranger beams on the dusty woodwork of stairs and panelling.

There was no other light in the hall. The curtains were drawn over the windows and the fire smouldered under a pile of white wood ashes. Veronica, with her heroic build, wrapped in her dark cloak, was a more dramatic figure than any Lady Macbeth ever seen on a stage, the setting of shadowy panelled hall richer in mystery and sombre suggestiveness than any stage set ever designed. There was about her the shadow of tragedy, a something sinister and terrible as she moved softly across the hall.

It was as she approached the fireplace that a low voice spoke from the shadows.

“Ronnie, I’ve come in. It’s so damned cold down there.”

There was no jerk in the hand which held the candle, no nervousness in Veronica Mallowood's voice when she answered, though her heart had given one wild leap as though it would choke her when she heard that unexpected voice. She answered naturally and quietly:

"I should think it was cold. It's freezing hard outside, the ground's stone hard. Why didn't you make the fire up, there's plenty of wood."

She set her candlestick down on a table and knelt in front of the fire, stirring the ashes and then using the bellows to fan the dull glow on the under side of half-consumed logs. Piling fresh wood on the blaze she said:

"That's better. This fire never fails one. It's always alive – like the house. I never come into the place without being aware that it greets me. Don't you want something to eat, Martin – or else a hot drink? I can easily get you something."

"No. I don't want anything. Don't go away, Ronnie. I want to talk to you. What's happened? That Inspector chap was here again, wasn't he? I heard his voice."

"Yes. He came... Don't bother about it, Martin. There's no need to worry."

"Aren't you a proper brick?" he said, and Veronica turned and looked at him. His face was half-shadowed, and she took a spill and lighted two more candles which stood in brass sconces on the chimney piece.

"Now I can see you properly," she said, her voice still calm and level. "You look better, Martin."

He laughed, a little rueful laugh, and spread out his thin hands to the blaze.

"Yes. I'm better. I've had a sort of cloud over my mind. I told you – I forgot everything. I've been imagining things. Sorry to be such a fool, Ronnie, but I dreamt I'd done something ghastly. I couldn't bear to come near any one, or be asked questions. You know, if you'd started asking me questions I think I should have gone raving... stark raving."

"Well, I haven't asked you any questions, have I? and I'm not going to"

"No, but I'm going to ask you some, and then perhaps I can get things straightened out. What did happen, Ronnie? I've forgotten... ever since I saw Paul... dead... I'd so often wanted to kill him, and I thought I'd done it at last. I told you, didn't I, that morning"

“You didn’t see Paul... dead,” she replied, her voice still very quiet and controlled. “Paul went away from here that Wednesday morning, ten days ago. Basil shot himself, upstairs in the playroom. There was a warrant out for his arrest, and he shot himself up there. The door was locked and Richard had to break it in. It’s about that that the police have been coming. But you couldn’t have seen Basil, Martin. The door was locked on the inside.”

“Oh, no. It wasn’t Basil I saw. It was Paul. I wish I could remember. Something gave my mind a jolt and I got muddled, like I’ve done before. I can remember that evening all right, when Paul and Basil were here. Paul was pretty foul. He said I was certifiable... you know”

“Oh, never mind,” she exclaimed. “He’ll never come here again. Soon the police will get tired of all these questions they’re asking and go away and leave us in peace again – just you and me.”

“Richard hasn’t come back then?”

“No. I don’t suppose he’ll ever come back”

Martin broke in with an exclamation, almost like a cry of fear.

“Ronnie, don’t say that... Do you remember me saying that to Paul... ‘you won’t come back,’ and then I saw him, lying there. God, I wish I could remember what I did.”

“Martin, Martin, don’t torture yourself! You couldn’t have seen Paul. He went away. He went to Tunis, as he planned. I don’t want to worry you about things, but I’m going to tell you this. Paul is dead. He was killed in Tunis. The inspector told me so this morning.”

“Good Lord! And I’ve been imagining all that... Ronnie, I must be quite mad. I thought... don’t interrupt... I’m beginning to remember. You say he went away, that Wednesday morning?”

“Yes. In his car – that opulent Rolls Royce. Richard saw him off from the front door, and Higgins put his suitcases in the back. I glanced out of my window and saw him drive away, in those loathsome russet tweeds and check overcoat.”

“Lord, yes!” Martin’s voice was excited now, and his face animated. “I remember. I saw him, too. Why, I waved to him. Richard was standing on the steps – but something was wrong. What was it? That’s where I begin to get muddled. I can remember seeing the car – and then I went along the corridor

towards Paul's room. I can't think what I wanted but I went to find out something."

Veronica was crouching by the fire, her cloak lying in supple folds on the Persian rug, her chin cupped in her hands.

"Why worry about it so much, Martin? You're imagining things again. Everything was just ordinary. I went to see if Cynthia Lorne had had her breakfast. Richard came upstairs again to his room, Basil was still asleep, and Paul was driving through the village. The villagers saw him, quite a lot of them."

Martin leant forward towards the blaze of the fire, his thin pale face flushed, his brows knit.

"I went into Paul's bedroom," he said slowly. "I remember now. It was all right, wasn't it – all quite ordinary... The bedclothes were tossed back, the room empty. I know it was empty, because I looked. I opened the chests, and that great press... What was I looking for, Ronnie? I know I had an idea about something, but I can't remember."

"Why bother about it?" she asked, and reached out her right hand and laid it on his. "I know you do forget things sometimes, Martin, and it has always frightened you. Haven't I always told you not to worry?"

He jerked his hand away and gave a nervous laugh, his thin shoulders shaking.

"I know you have, but I can't help worrying. Where am I in those lost hours, Ronnie? What do I do? It's as though I lose bits out of my life. I cease to exist as myself – and I can't remember what I've done. This time I know something ghastly happened. It's all in a muddle at the back of my mind. I remember... looking in Paul's bedroom – but he wasn't there. He'd gone away. Why should I have bothered about his going? I wanted him to go. He frightens me. I always remember that time he locked me in, between the doors of the west room and the oriel room. I heard him laugh as the door clicked shut and left me in the dark."

Veronica remembered what Martin was talking about – remembered it all too well. Martin had been eight years old, and Paul eighteen. It had been six hours before Martin was found, because Paul had gone out and forgotten – so he said – all about the trick he had played on his small brother. For six hours

Martin had been shut into the narrow dark space between the two doors, and it had been Veronica who had found her twin at last. She had opened one of the doors between the disused bedrooms at the west end of the house, and Martin's unconscious form had tumbled out at her feet. She was but a small child herself, and she had screamed, "He's dead, and Paul's killed him. Paul's killed him."

Even at this length of time Veronica had to stop herself shuddering when she remembered opening the door and seeing Martin topple forward on her feet. She could still hear her own screams... "Paul's killed him, and I'm going to kill Paul."

She turned to Martin, controlling her voice to quietness.

"I know. I've never forgotten. It was beastly – but it's all long long ago, Martin. You were all right again next day, and Paul went away."

"Those doors. It was something to do with those doors."

Martin's voice was almost a whisper now, and the fear in his mind spoke in his voice, so that it shook and quavered. Veronica spoke again, quickly, urgently:

"Martin, that was all over and finished, years and years ago. Don't go on thinking about it. Let's talk about something else."

"Those doors," he persisted. "I went into the west room, where Paul slept. It was all right in there – but the door was locked. The door leading into the oriel room. I remember now. We didn't lock it, Ronnie, did we?"

"It was locked when the room was made ready for Paul, Martin."

"No, it couldn't have been, or if it was, Paul had the key. I know. I heard him moving about in the room next to his, the evening before. He was always like that when he came back here – spying round. Those doors..."

He sat hunched up, his chin sunk on to his chest, his sunken eyes staring painfully across the shadowy hall.

"I was in Paul's room... and that door was locked," he said, the words coming slowly. "I went along the west corridor to the door of the room next to Paul's. That was locked, too. I remember now. Why did you lock the doors, Ronnie?"

"I didn't. You're imagining things, my dear. Leave off worrying, Martin." Her voice was urgent and she caught his hand again. "Martin, shall we go away

for a bit, you and me? You remember when we went to Scotland that time? It was fun, wasn't it; you liked the fishing – those speckled trout, and the salmon jumps. Do you remember how we tried poaching, and how exciting it was, lying in the heather?"

"I can't go away. You know. They're watching for me. I've seen them, those men in the park. They're going to hang me, because I killed Paul. If I could only remember I shouldn't mind so much. It was something to do with those doors. I came downstairs again. I remember that. I knew all the keys were in the cupboard in the morning room. It's queer, Ronnie. I'm getting bits coming back now – quite clearly. I can remember going to the cupboard where the extra keys were kept. It was locked, but the key was in the drawer in your desk. I got it out."

"Oh, no, you didn't. You're still dreaming, Martin. You went out into the garden not long after Paul had left. You say that you remember seeing him go. You saw him drive away. After that you've got in a muddle. Perhaps you had a fall – like you did once before. You must have hurt yourself and not realised it. It's quite a simple thing to happen. If you fall and hit your head you can get concussion without realising it, and then you forget things and get them muddled up – especially if you're not kept quiet and looked after."

Martin disregarded her speech as though he had not heard it.

"I got the key I wanted – the one you had made to control all those locks at the west end of the first floor – and I went upstairs again. I heard someone call out – that would have been Basil, wouldn't it? He was shouting to Richard, something about wanting his letters, and Richard answered, you know that cheerful airy way he has of speaking – 'all right, old chap, all right, I'll see about it...' I want to get it quite right, Ronnie, so that I'm not muddled any more. Richard and Basil were in their own rooms, at the east end of the corridor. Mrs. Lorne was still there, in the blue room, wasn't she? and you?"

"I was in my room until eight o'clock, when I went along to see Cynthia. That's all plain enough, Martin. Paul had left, driving himself in his own car, Richard and Basil were in their own rooms, I was in mine – and you had gone out."

"No. There's something wrong there," said Martin very seriously. "I didn't go out then – not until later – and, if Paul went away he must have come back.

I... I saw him. It wasn't Basil, and it wasn't Richard. It must have been Paul. It was Paul. Oh, my God."

He bent his head in his hands and groaned, "Between those doors, Ronnie, where he put me... I said I'd do the same to him, one day."

"Oh, my dear, why won't you believe me?" cried Veronica. "Paul left this house before eight o'clock, and he drove direct to Croydon. He got aboard the plane, and he flew to Lisbon. If only the police hadn't been such fools, they could have stopped him there. The Superintendent and the man who came to arrest Basil wasted hours and hours, pretending to prove things – as though any proof was needed. It was all just too horribly obvious. Now try to think it out. We know Basil and Richard were in this house after Paul left. You know that, too, because you heard Basil speaking and Richard replying. We know Paul boarded the plane at Croydon – so it's just utter nonsense for you to say you saw Paul again after he'd driven away. It's impossible!"

"Then why do I remember it?" he asked miserably. "I can see two sets of pictures – one when Paul drove away... and another when I opened that door. Then – everything went blank. I can't remember or get it straight. There's a sort of gap. When I next remember anything I was down in the priest's vault, and I kept saying to myself, 'I meant to kill him. I wanted to kill him, and now I've done it.' I've been trying to remember how I did it."

Veronica pressed her hands together to prevent them shaking. From Martin's confused narrative one point emerged clearly enough: he had suffered some shock which had all but unhinged his mind. The recollection of the crucial point still evaded him, but some terror had driven him to hide in the dark vaults of his home: something he had done – or seen done – something which clouded his mind and which brought him to the borderland of madness.

She leant forwards towards him, speaking very quietly:

"Listen, Martin. Paul went to Tunis. He was killed there, and the police"

"God! What's that?"

Martin's voice was raised in a shrill cry of fear, and Veronica could not control a jerk of her shoulders. At the back of the hall the telephone bell suddenly shrilled out, and the note of the bell sounded intolerably loud in the silent house.

"It's only the telephone, Martin. Oh, to hell with it... I can't go on talking

through that infernal row. I'll go and answer it, Martin. I expect it's Cynthia. She always rings up at the most insane hours. I won't be a minute."

Catching her cloak around her, Veronica ran to the back of the hall, and a moment later there was silence when she lifted the receiver. Martin leant towards the fire again, and then suddenly sat up, stiff with fear. A low voice spoke from the stairs.

"Martin! Can you hear me, Martin?"

It was a very deep voice, pitched just above a whisper. While Martin sat rigid by the fire, the voice went on:

"It's Paul. You remember, don't you? You saw me... between the doors. Come upstairs, Martin. I'm waiting for you... you know where. Come and look. You'll remember everything then. Come and find me."

Martin's thin screech of fear was no louder than that of a rabbit caught in a trap. He stood up, his tall thin body swaying, as the voice went on:

"Come up here, Martin. You know you've got to come. You've got to come."

As though fascinated by the very thing he dreaded, Martin crept forward to the stairs, swaying as he moved, going forward slowly, step by step. As he reached the stairs and put out his hand on the rail to steady himself, another form moved across the hall. A man had come forward from behind the heavy damask curtains which hung across the windows. He moved silently, keeping to the shadows by the walls, and crept towards the stairway. Here the candle light hardly penetrated the shadows of the vast house, and the man's dark figure was but a blur against the darkness of the sombre woodwork.

From above the low voice spoke again.

"Come, Martin. You'll soon know now. You'll remember just what you did, and how you did it – between the doors."

There was something terrible about the soft voice, and Martin Mallowood panted, his laboured breath sounding loud as he went upstairs, followed by the other silent mover.

At the top of the stairs the corridor was in absolute darkness. Martin turned to the left, towards the west end of the house where Paul Mallowood had slept, and the voice sounded in front of him, soft and mocking, "You know the way, don't you? I'm here, Martin."

Along the corridor Martin Mallowood shuffled, dragging his feet as a lame man does. He had put out his hand against the panelling to guide him, and the sound of his movement came as a dragging slurring rhythm. He walked to the end of the corridor and then turned right, until he found the open door of the oriel room, next to the bedroom where Paul had slept on his last night at Wulfstane. There was the faintest glow of light here, a pale luminosity which shone from the open connecting-door between the two bedrooms. Martin shuffled up to the door, and then there was a sudden thud, as he was pitched forwards. His voice rang out, suddenly loud and clear.

“It’s not Paul. It’s not Paul! God, I remember now! It wasn’t Paul!”

His cry died away as the door was slammed on him. Between the two doors he still shouted, his voice faint and muffled, hardly audible between the heavy doors. “It wasn’t Paul, I tell you, it wasn’t Paul!”

In the darkness of the oriel room a man chuckled – a grim, horrible sound. He had turned the key in the lock after he had shut Martin in between the two doors, and he stood for a second in the darkness. Then a voice sounded from the stairs.

“Here, Ronnie. It’s all right. I heard something queer up here.”

The speaker who had enticed Martin up the stairs had now subtly altered his voice – and the alteration was noted by the man who had hidden behind the curtains in the hall. It was extraordinarily like Martin’s voice speaking now, a deep voice, but hesitant, with a little stutter in it. The speaker went forward in the darkness, passed the unseen watcher outside the door, so close that he almost touched him and went on towards the stair head.

“There’s someone up here, Ronnie,” he went on, his voice quavering as though with fear.

Down below in the hall three candles flickered, and the log fire blazed. It was dark in the corridor, but any one standing at the stair head was visible against the faint light far below. The watcher in the blackness of the corridor could see the man who spoke and could see the gleam of something he held in his hand. In that tense second, when the watcher poised for a spring, one of the old boards creaked under his weight, and the crack of the shifting board sounded as loud as a shot in the silence. If the watcher had shouted aloud he could not have proclaimed his presence more clearly.

“God! There is someone up here...” The words were gasped out as the speaker sprang sideways, and a spurt of flame rent the darkness for a split second as a pistol barked.

Veronica’s deep voice cried out in a passionate call of fear as she rushed for the stairs.

“Martin, Martin, where are you?”

There was a rush of running footsteps and a mocking voice called back:

“It’s Paul. I’ve come back, I tell you! I’ve come back!”

When Macdonald had hidden behind the curtains in the great hall, he had had no idea what was to be the outcome of his vigil. He had not expected that Martin Mallowood would venture into the open in his silent home. Event had followed hard on the heel of event – and a creaking board had given away the detective’s presence when his hand was actually stretched out to seize his man. As the speaker rushed away down the corridor towards the east end of the house, Macdonald shouted:

“Martin’s locked between the doors. Go and let him out!”

Into the detective’s mind as he raced down the corridor after the fugitive flashed a sudden fear. If he were laid out, and Veronica rendered helpless, Martin would be helpless too, locked in that dark narrow space, until kind oblivion should overtake him.

Even as he ran, Macdonald’s ears strained to hear the movements of the man in front of him: the C.I.D. man realised the very second that the other paused, and he flattened himself against the panelling to avoid the shot which came down the corridor.

This was a mad business indeed, thought Macdonald. Were he himself killed, the shooting might well be put to Martin’s account. A second later, the fugitive had taken to his heels again: eastwards down the corridor he ran, turning by the baize door which led to the servants’ quarters and service staircase. Here he paused, and shouted aloud to the shadows:

“I’m Paul Mallowood! I’ve come back again, Veronica! I told you I should come back!”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

WHEN Macdonald had made his way into Wulfstane Manor shortly before midnight, he had not done so without a definite plan. Peter Vernon had complained that the C.I.D. men stationed in the park were useless from the point of view of keeping the house under observation. Macdonald was fully aware of that fact. He had stationed his men at a distance from the house, and given them a definite beat to patrol because he had intended that they should be noticed on that particular beat. There was one exit from certain ruined vaults which had been part of Wulfstane Abbey crypt when the Abbey was in being. It seemed to Macdonald very improbable that the half-ruined entrance he had observed still connected with the cellars of the manor house, but he set his men to watch it, his intention being to give the impression that the watch was concentrating on a beat well away from the house. In other words, he hoped that Veronica would observe the “boy scout” tactics of the C.I.D. men, and would laugh to herself over it.

Until the evening, when he made his own entrance, Macdonald had left the interior of the house severely alone. He wanted to breed confidence in the inmates – whatever inmates might still be living in the vast, intricate building. One man only had been entrusted with the task of examining the exterior of the building. This was a man named Beding, generally employed on “special work.” Beding had studied architecture and archaeology, and he knew more about ancient English houses than any man in England in Macdonald’s opinion. Much of his work was done in libraries. He had a reader’s ticket for both the British Museum and the Bodleian libraries, and he could unearth ancient books which gave him information which might have surprised the owners of certain old houses. Beding knew that all houses of the age and architectural interest of Wulfstane were documented, if you only knew how to get at the sources of the commentator’s work, and at Macdonald’s request

Beding had spent some days disinterring facts about Wulfstane from long forgotten volumes, hidden in the vaults of the great libraries.

When Macdonald determined to hazard his own secret search in the Manor, he had two men posted outside at the east end of the building. One was Beding himself, and one was Detective Reeves – the latter useful for his faculty of being able to see like a cat in the dimness of a cloudy night, and for his ability – also cat-like – to move without a sound. These two men took up their post in an unexpected place – actually within the walls of the kitchen garden. Beding had worked out the most possible secret exit from the cellars of Wulfstane, and this connected with a tunnel in which the heating flues ran up to the great glass houses above ground. When the kitchen garden had been laid out and “walled” in the time of William and Mary, the tunnel which connected with the vaults had been used for storage.

At a later period, when the greenhouses were built, and heating installed in them, use had been made of the tunnel for the passage of heating pipes. It was some years now since the greenhouses had been heated: they were a luxury which Veronica had dispensed with as increasing taxation and a diminishing income had driven her to curtail expenses. Higgins, the gardener, used one small house for his seedlings, but the range of three great houses, including the winery, were now to all intents and purposes derelict, for one gardener could not attempt the work they involved, even though there had been money for their upkeep.

It was Beding who, through study of old architectural treatises, had discovered where the tunnel lay, and the secret of its unexpected exit. When he and Reeves first approached the great walled garden they had found its doorway securely padlocked, and Reeves had oiled and picked the lock with silent skill and swiftness.

It was just before eleven o'clock that the two men, silent as shadows, had entered the walled garden and found their way to the brick-lined pit where the disused furnace was installed. It was quite dark down there, and Reeves had produced a tiny torch, whose beam shone through a mere slit in its casing, and worked it along the brick walls until he found the low tunnel which enclosed the pipes. Beding gave a grunt of assent, and went down on all fours on the ground and proceeded to insinuate himself into the narrow arched space.

Reeves waited for a while, his lively mind considering the prospect with distaste, for he hated tunnels, and this one was only just wide enough for a man to work his body along the ground, snail-wise. A note like that of a startled owl gave him the signal to proceed, and he followed Beding's mode of progression below the arch, crawling along the dusty cindery floor. He had only crawled thus a few yards when his outstretched hand felt a step downwards in the tunnel floor, and Beding's whisper reached him, "Ten steps down. You can stand at the bottom."

Reeves heaved a sigh of relief when he was able to stand upright again: he felt ready to cope with any excitements now that he had the free use of his limbs again, but he had hated the confined space of the tunnel, and the sense that his arms were pinioned and helpless.

"There's a doorway in, front here: see what you can make of it. If it's bolted we might as well go back and wait in furnace pit. If you can open it we'll go on," whispered Beding.

Reeves set to work with his pick-lock tools, working cautiously in the darkness after a brief inspection of the big keyhole. He was intent on working silently, and all his faculties were concentrated on feeling for the spring of the lock, as his fingers worked his skeleton key a little in and a little out, seeking for the point at which the cunning wards would grip. After a few minutes his fingers felt the spring pressing against the lever he held, and with a sharp click the lock sprang back and the door swung on its hinges.

Again Boding took the lead, and Reeves waited until the signal came for him to move on. A whispered message reached him in the darkness:

"Put your hands on my shoulder. Twenty steps forward and then turn right. That will bring us under the house somewhere near the kitchens of the east wing."

As he went forward again in the darkness, his arm outstretched so that his hand rested on Beding's shoulder, Reeves realised how much his own faculties depended on eyesight. Outside, under the gloom of the night sky, he had been able to see easily enough, the world about him a series of grey tones, colourless but visible. Down here in the vaulted passage, where light was totally excluded, he could of course see nothing at all, and the effect was to make him lose his sense of direction. He had no idea which way he was facing, and distances

seemed falsified. He counted out twenty steps, but he seemed to have traversed an unreasonably long distance before the count was complete.

“Wait here and listen,” Beding whispered to him. Reeves heard the other move a little, and the sound came of something hard touching the stone wall. Beding was applying a microphone, a tiny instrument made for the detection of sound travelling through walls or floor. The two men stood immobile, in absolute silence, for several minutes, and then Beding said:

“I’m pretty certain there’s no one down here. The passage forks here. There’s one tunnel running due west – that’ll be under the terrace on the south front – the other turns north a bit, further under the house. If you’ll stay here, I’ll go and explore the west bit. Don’t move and don’t show a light. There are steps down on your right. If anybody comes from the direction of the house you’ll hear them easily enough.”

He moved away, and though Reeves strained his ears he could not hear a sound of the other’s footsteps. In his soft soled shoes, without the aid of any light, Beding went down the stone-flagged passage absolutely silently.

Reeves leant his shoulders against the stone wall and waited patiently in the darkness. He could hear nothing. He could see nothing, and it was well for him that he had a detective’s training in patience. The time seemed interminable, the lack of action intolerable in the silent darkness. The first he knew of Beding’s return was the other’s whisper close beside him, “Somebody’s been using the cellars as a hidey-hole all right. There’s bedding down there, and some books. There’s an air shaft leading up somewhere, because I could feel the draught, and there’s a well in the floor. That pretty well dates it – early medieval. There’s nobody there now; though. We might as well go on and get a bit closer under the house. A light won’t do any harm if you keep it turned down.”

The tiny glimmer from Reeves’ torch illumined only the stone floor and the worn stone steps which led down another six feet into a square vaulted apartment. In the farther wall of this small chamber was an arched doorway, set in a deep recess. This proved to be unlocked, and Reeves put out his torch while Beding listened with his sound detector.

“Not a sound,” he breathed. “This one leads into the cellars under the east wing. I reckon the chap’s gone up into the house, seeing he’s left this door

open... Hallo,... what's that?"

"That" was a muffled report, sounding from the far distance. It was not loud, but to Reeves' trained ears the brief "thud" had only one meaning – a shot. His faculties intensely alert, he whispered "Gun shot. The chief's started a hare. Which is the way into the house? That door? That'll be the bolt-hole."

In the darkness, Reeves moved across to the door and found it swung open to his hand. As he stood there another report sounded from above, a little clearer than the last, but still a long way away. Reeves flicked on his torch for a split second and saw a flight of stone steps leading upwards. This flight must connect up with one of the rooms in the east wing, he reckoned.

He whispered to Beding, "If any one does a bolt this way, they'll likely come down those steps – and they've got a gun by the sound of things. It looks like being lively. Stand well against the wall at the bottom there. I'll try to collar him at the top of the steps."

Softly he crept up the stone steps, and even as he mounted he heard sounds from above – somebody running. He had no time to find out if the door at the top of the steps opened inwards towards him, because the running footsteps were swiftly drawing nearer. With instinctive caution Reeves withdrew a little lower, two steps down, lest the door be hurled open in his face and he be flung backwards down the steps. He had a second to brace himself as he realised that the runner was at the door – and then a man's body met his own, driving at him with the impact of a runner descending.

Reeves gripped the other and flung his own weight forwards, against the stone wall on the opposite side of the steps. He was gripped in turn, and heard his captive cursing for one breathless second, and then the two went headlong down the flight together, locked in a mad clutch as they hurtled downwards. Somebody cried out as they thudded on the stone floor at the bottom – not Reeves, not the man he still held, but the unfortunate Beding, who had been brought down by the impact of the others.

Reeves felt the powerful heave of his captive's limbs jerking wildly to get free: he heard a report like thunder and felt the hot blast of a pistol which went off a yard from his own face, reached out to grip the hand which held the weapon and was deafened again by a shot which struck the stone wall and ricocheted back against the steps. In that mad moment of physical endeavour

the wiry detective clutched ever closer to the man on the floor. Keep close enough to him and he was less likely to stop a bullet. The last shots from the six-shooter roared out, and still Reeves held on. The other man, with astounding strength, heaved himself sideways and forced himself up, Reeves hanging on like a bulldog. Still clinching, the two somehow staggered up, swayed together for a dizzy second and then went down again as they fouled Beding's feet. Reeves was undermost this time. His head hit the stone wall and his grip relaxed for a second, and the other tore himself free. In that dizzy sickening moment of semi-consciousness Reeves was aware for a brief second of bitter disappointment. He'd mucked it... Let the blighter go... a blaze of light flashed across his vision before oblivion shut down on him for a while.

* * *

When Macdonald had heard the shout from the baize door on the first floor he had paused a second.

The words echoed back along the panelled corridor: "I'm Paul Mallowood! I've come back again!"

The great deep voice sounded mad – mad, mocking and defiant, as though the ghosts of all the wild Mallowoods were reincarnated in that challenging shout. Then came the slap-slap of running footsteps again, creaking boards, the old house cracking and groaning as ancient stairs told the tale of their running burden. Macdonald followed, through the baize door, down the worn twisting stairs, through another door, striving to keep a sense of direction as he pursued. He could still hear the running footsteps: knew when the wooden floors beneath those feet changed to stone flags: he felt the chill of the stone rising about him as he made his way through the kitchens, felt the draught of air when a swing door was flung open and to again, and somehow found his own way in the darkness to the service door which connected with the dining-room. He knew which way they were going now – to the east wing and the cellars. The fugitive knew his own way well, and Macdonald marvelled that the other did not stop to lack a door which would have impeded the pursuit.

"He's lost his head at last: gone plumb crazy, with the excitement of his own inventions."

Cool-headed himself, Macdonald found time to think as he followed the

other through dark echoing rooms which smelt of mildew and rotting wood – the man in front of him must be past thinking. He was just intent on flight – flight through the cellars of Wulfstane Manor.

Because the rooms were strange to him, and he could only hazard a light in brief faint flickers, Macdonald was some way behind his quarry when the final room of the east wing was reached by the latter, and the door to the cellars opened. Macdonald heard the thud of the falling bodies as Reeves went down with his captive, and reached the top of the steps as the last shot roared its echoing, earsplitting report. It was the light of Macdonald's torch which blazed in Reeves' eyes for a second as consciousness left him.

When the fugitive saw the light and realised that another pursuer was at his heels, he turned and fled again, through the open door by which Reeves and Beding had come. Macdonald heard Beding's voice from the floor, "If he takes the right fork he's done – it's blocked that way... Simmonds and Yates are on guard outside the garden."

Macdonald was up the next flight almost on the heels of the fugitive: the two reached the fork in the cellar passage almost neck to neck, but the fugitive swerved to escape capture and raced down the right-hand passage in the darkness.

Macdonald called up his final effort of speed, knowing only by the sound of running footsteps that he was very close to his quarry. He sprang forward with all the force in his powerful well-trained body, gripped the other squarely and forced him down by sheer impact. The two went down with a thud on the stone floor, but the C.I.D. man. was uppermost.

It was the end of the struggle. The other's head struck the flag-stones with a force which left him limp and unconscious. When Beding crawled along with a torchlight he found Macdonald applying handcuffs in the darkness.

"Which of them is it?" asked Beding. "Paul?"

"No. Paul's dead. This one's Richard. He nearly got away with it, only brother Martin cramped his style by disappearing. Martin had the evidence needed, only his mind was too confused to formulate it. They've all got a screw loose somewhere, these Mallowoods."

Beding chuckled. "There was method in this one's madness, though. Do you know where he was leading you when you caught him? To the vault of the

old keep. There's a well there, God knows how deep"

"Pleasant fellow," said Macdonald. "Martin for the madhouse, me for the well. He's saved me a lot of trouble by this night's work, all the same. Hard to plead not guilty after this little performance."

Beding rubbed his head thoughtfully. "You say this one's Richard, and Paul's dead. Where's Martin?"

"Upstairs, I hope, with Veronica."

"And where's Basil?"

"Somewhere in northern Africa, travelling under the name of Brownleigh. That's a guess, but I've a feeling that it's a good guess. They'll catch him before long."

* * *

An hour later, Macdonald was talking to Martin and Veronica Mallowood. In a few terse sentences Macdonald gave them his own interpretation of the Wulfstane case. Then he said to Martin:

"When you saw the Rolls Royce drive away that morning, something gave your mind a shock, and you have been worried ever since because you could not remember what happened. Wasn't it really a fact that you were afraid that your sister was involved in what had happened? If I assure you now that I know your sister had nothing to do with it, will you tell me just what you have remembered?"

"I did forget. I get muddled, when things happen," said Martin slowly. "I remember now. It wasn't Paul I saw drive away. It was Basil. I found Paul upstairs, between those doors. He was dead."

"No. He wasn't dead. He was unconscious," replied Macdonald.

Veronica looked at him with her intent frowning gaze.

"How do you know I had nothing to do with it?" she asked abruptly, and Macdonald replied:

"What I have heard and seen this evening has proved it. I'll tell you later on just what really happened. It was a matter of fitting bits together, here a little and there a little."

He left her then with Martin. As Macdonald turned away he heard the latter saying again, "I got muddled, Ronnie. I was afraid..."

Macdonald had guessed just what fear it was that had temporarily unhinged Martin's mind.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“**I** ALWAYS said it looked a straightforward case, but the facts just didn’t make common sense.”

It was Inspector Long who spoke. He had taken a “busman’s holiday,” and driven down to Wulfstane to see Macdonald there on the day after the tussle in the cellars. Long wanted to see “exactly how the blighter had pulled it off,” and he had come to see the actual premises again so that he could grasp the facts clearly when Macdonald explained the tenor of his own researches.

“From the point of view of first appearances, there seemed to be only one conclusion, and that was that Basil Mallowood had shot himself about five minutes before you found his body,” said Macdonald.

“Exactly, and I didn’t trust appearances,” said Long, “only I was slow in thinking things out. One thing was obvious enough. The dead man had died only a few minutes before we found his body. I knew that was a hard fact and nothing could alter it. Then, when I began to consider it, I realised what a marvellous opportunity it was for Basil Mallowood to have done a bolt with Paul’s papers and passport, leaving Paul dead in his place – only it wouldn’t work, because if Basil had left England on that plane at 10.0 o’clock, he just couldn’t have been at Wulfstane to shoot Paul at 12.30. Apart from the difficulty of working out the mechanics of the shooting, the time of it contradicted the theory. Basil could not have done it.”

“That’s the size of it,” agreed Macdonald, “There were also these facts to trip up on. The letter found in the room by the body was written in Basil’s writing. We couldn’t get away from that, and yet, if Paul himself had not left by plane at 10.0 o’clock, then who had impersonated him? Basil and Paul were very much alike, and Basil was obviously the man for the impersonation. It wasn’t only a matter of satisfying the airport people that the man who left by

plane was the man whose photograph was on the passport: it was a matter of satisfying the gardener at Wulfstane and the village folk that it was Paul who had left. The man who drove away in the Rolls Royce wore Paul Mallowood's clothes, moreover, the noticeable suit of russet tweeds. I was pretty certain all along that Basil Mallowood left Wulfstane dressed in Paul's clothes, and that he was accepted as Paul by Higgins and the villagers."

"That meant that Basil couldn't have shot Paul, then," said Long. "I kept on tripping up over that infernal snag. In addition was the fact that Basil was seen after the Rolls Royce had driven off. The maid, Ada, who took his letters up, swore she had seen and spoken to Basil at 10.0 o'clock – Paul in the plane, Basil in his bedroom. Nice and alliterative, but the devil of it was there were the two of them, alive and well at 10.0 o'clock."

"Yes. That was a neat arrangement," said Macdonald. "As murders go, this was a very well thought out effort. Actually the murderer forgot nothing, and the evidence was all very convincing. This was the little problem: one Mallowood, in Paul's clothes, with Paul's passport, in the plane: another Mallowood, in Basil's clothes, with Basil's farewell letter, at Wulfstane. It was easy enough to suspect that Basil had got away, leaving Paul dead in his place, but all the evidence contradicted that assumption. The first problem was to decide on the identity of the dead man. Richard and Veronica both said that deceased was Basil. The clothes were Basil's, the suicide letter was Basil's, and Basil had every motive to shoot himself. The method of shooting seemed clear proof of suicide, and there wasn't a single tangible proof to invalidate that theory."

"No, but we were both convinced that the suicide was phoney," said Long, and Macdonald went on:

"When I took Paul Mallowood's clerk to Croydon to interview the airport people, I was more than ever convinced that Basil had impersonated Paul. He noticed every detail about his brother – the damaged finger, the birthmark on his face, Paul's gestures and cough and habits of speech. Basil had also travelled on the same plane before, and left an envelope with Paul's name on it in his place. All very convincing, at a first glance."

"But not convincing once your suspicions were aroused," said Long, and Macdonald nodded and continued:

“Now as to the fingerprint evidence. Take that ‘suicide letter,’ written by Basil only a few hours before it was found. If the handwriting were Basil’s, and the corpse wasn’t, the fingerprints on the letter ought to have demonstrated the fact. Not at all. The only fingerprints on the letter were those of deceased. Next, as to Basil’s toilet articles, in Basil’s suitcase. The clothes in the case were Basil’s all right. The ebony brushes and other articles had Basil’s initials on them – and they were covered with fingerprints of deceased. They’d obviously been used by deceased. As a matter of fact, they were deceased’s. Now we couldn’t get hold of any fingerprints of Basil’s either at his flat or at his office. He’d been damned careful. The only papers he left were papers which would be worked over in the inevitable audit, and in that working over all Basil’s prints were rendered smudged and illegible – quite useless from our point of view. That was obviously a carefully calculated effect, and it worked both ways. It prevented us proving that the corpse was not Basil’s, but it also put us on our guard by warning us that Basil had taken precautions about his fingerprints being identified.”

Long nodded. “Yes. I saw all that, but it was a facer when you found the same conditions applied in Paul’s case.”

“No, not quite the same conditions,” said Macdonald. “Paul had virtually retired from his city business. He was planning to live a life of leisure, and his tour abroad was the token of his changed manner of living. There was nothing really suspicious or unnatural about Paul’s decision to have his flat totally redecorated in his absence from England. It was a sensible arrangement. He would come back to a freshly painted and papered flat without having any of the unpleasant part in the smells and general upheaval. As for his method of putting all his valuables and books and papers into safe deposit, that seemed to me to be characteristic of a man in whom suspicion was second nature. Suspicion seems to be inbred in the Mallowood family – they’re all tarred with the same brush in that respect.”

“All the same,” put in Long, “the fact that you couldn’t get Paul’s fingerprints either made him look damned fishy.”

“Agreed. I had an open mind about Paul – but the problem at the outset was this. We had no handle against Paul, so to speak. Taking into consideration the plain facts you had elicited, it seemed obvious that Paul could have had

nothing to do with Basil's death. I was not justified in asking for a search warrant to examine Paul's private papers at his office when I had no evidence against the man at all. If you think it out now you've got to admit that we had nothing against Paul. We had suspicions about Basil's suicide, but we hadn't a spot of real evidence to justify them. You say that you distrusted appearances, and you were right – but more than that was needed to take action."

Long grinned. "Yes, and that was where you took over."

Macdonald nodded, and got up and began to pace the room. The two men were sitting in the playroom on the top floor of Wulfstane Manor, Long lounging against the old table where the young Mallowoods had carved their names long ago.

"The first thing that occurred to me when I read your report was that if the shooting were indeed a murder and not suicide, then we were up against someone with imagination," went on Macdonald. "Coupled to that imagination was foresight and a sense of detail. I used my own imagination a good deal to formulate any theory at all – and it was a useful factor. However, to get down to brass tacks when I took over: I agreed with you that the impossible seeming facts were that Basil had got away abroad – in Paul's clothes, with Paul's papers – and that Paul (in Basil's clothes) was the man who was shot in this room at 12.30 on the Wednesday morning. That assumption involved the fact that Basil could not have shot Paul himself. However it was done, somebody else did the shooting. Query, who, and how?"

"Martin, Veronica, or Richard?" queried Long, "and, how?"

"Wait a bit for the method. First, as to the culprit. It seemed to me, at a first glance, that all three might be involved. I was very anxious to avoid precipitate action, because it would have been so easy to involve Martin and Veronica in suspicions which could never have been disproved. They were very near to being in a hopeless situation, because it was so easy to argue that they were both involved. Start from my assumption that Basil went away and that Paul was killed. Richard gave evidence that he saw Paul off in the car. Martin was seen by the gardener to wave good-bye to the man who drove off in the Rolls Royce. Veronica gave evidence that she heard Basil speak to her after 9.0 o'clock the same morning"

"And the maid gave evidence that she saw Basil in his bedroom at 10.0

o'clock," burst out Long, and Macdonald replied:

"That was to me the crucial point – the point where the play was over-acted, the plot too much underlined. On the assumption that it was Basil who had gone away by plane – and I was convinced that such was the truth – then somebody acted the part of Basil to hoodwink the maid. She said that she saw Basil in his pyjamas, shaving, the lather still on his chin. She didn't see Basil at all. She saw Richard in Basil's pyjamas, his face lathered, his hair on end. She expected to see Basil, and she swore she had seen Basil, but she hadn't. You look into the time-table. Richard had plenty of time unaccounted for just then. He slipped into Basil's bedroom, and played Basil's part, very convincingly. He proved that Basil was still in his bedroom when the letters were taken up at 10.0 o'clock."

Macdonald paused a moment and then went on:

"That was the only explanation that made sense. I was prepared to believe that Basil could impersonate Paul at Croydon and on the plane: very few other men, if any, could have played that impersonation, because although the Mallowoods resemble each other closely, they are very unordinary types: their features and eyes and build are very characteristic. Now as to the impersonation of Basil to hoodwink the maid. Martin could not have done it. His fair head, weedy build, and inclination to stutter would all have given him away. Richard could have done it easily enough. Moreover, if the assumption on which I based my argument were valid, and it was Basil who drove away in the Rolls Royce, Richard must have known it. It was Richard who saw the car off. It must have been Richard who disposed of Paul in the interval between the time when the maid took his breakfast up at 7.0 o'clock and the time that Basil drove off at 7.50. You remember that the maid saw all three brothers just after 7.0 – Paul in bed, Richard going into Paul's room, and Basil in the passage, coming away from the bathroom. Of course, there was always the possibility that Martin and Veronica were involved too. Of that I couldn't be certain. My feeling was that Veronica would not have involved herself in a crime in association with Basil, whom she was known to have detested when she was younger, and with Richard, whom she had not seen since the famous family row over the will."

Long nodded. "I think that was sound reasoning. If Veronica had

committed a crime – and the Lord knows, she looks quite capable of any crime – she'd have played a lone hand. No family plots for Veronica."

"Well, here was my reconstruction," went on Macdonald. "That it was based on imagination I'm quite willing to admit, but in the absence of direct evidence the only thing to do was to work out a hypothetical case and see if it fitted the facts. I began with the assumption that Basil had got away on Paul's papers. It followed, therefore, that somebody other than Basil had shot Paul, working in connivance with Basil, the latter point being proved by the fact that Basil wrote that 'suicide letter' before he left the house. I worked out the following possibilities. Basil and Richard had worked out this plot between them, when Basil had got wind of Paul's impending retirement and tour abroad. Basil could have learnt about the latter facts from Mrs. Lorne, who was in touch with both brothers. She denied having passed on the information to Basil, but I think that was because she had some inkling that that information was somehow used for nefarious purposes."

"Then you argued that the plot was pre-arranged, and had been hatching for some time?" asked Long.

Macdonald nodded. "Undoubtedly. It couldn't have been done on the spur of the moment. Probably Basil and Richard met abroad, in the south of France or in Tunis, to discuss possibilities. When final arrangements were to be made, Paul's date for departure having been settled, some exchange of communications would have been necessary between Richard, in Alexandria or wherever he was, and the plotter or plotters in England – but I'll return to that point later. I want to carry on with my own argument about events on that Wednesday morning.

"Paul was taking his breakfast in bed. Richard went in to chat to him – and knocked him out, rendering him unconscious, but not killing him. After that must have followed a hectic half hour. Basil dressed in Paul's clothes. Richard hid Paul temporarily in the space between the communicating bedroom doors of Paul's room and the oriel room. Basil took Paul's luggage with him, and left his own, of course, at Wulfstane. The only properties he exchanged were Paul's ebony hairbrushes, which resembled his own. These he left among his own luggage, so that there was proof that the fingerprints of the corpse were identical with fingerprints in Basil's luggage. Incidentally their initials were the

same. Paul Blaise de Lisle Mallowood and Basil Philip de Lisle Mallowood. P. B. de L. M. and B. P. de L. M. make ciphers which are indistinguishable in monogram form.”

Macdonald pointed to the carved names on the old oak table, and was silent for a moment as he remembered Richard Mallowood pointing out the names to him. Then he continued:

“Basil drove off, dressed in Paul’s clothes, in Paul’s car, and Richard was left to carry out the plot. He was as cool as a cucumber over it. He chatted to Veronica, and asked for Basil’s letters to be taken up to him at 10.0 o’clock. Doubtless Basil’s bedroom door was safely locked in the interim when Richard was not in there. It was Richard who answered Veronica when she called good-morning to Basil. It was Richard who dressed the unconscious Paul in Basil’s clothes and carried him upstairs to the playroom, using the staircase at the west end of the house. Paul was kept unconscious by the hypodermic injection of one of the rarer barbituric drugs. If the drug had been administered in the breakfast coffee – my first guess – the drug would have been discovered when the contents of deceased’s stomach were examined, but there was only a negative result from that examination”

Long broke in, “How much of this is fact ascertained later, and how much earlier assumption?”

“Well, to make my hypothesis workable I had to assume that Paul was kept alive but helpless from 7.0 o’clock till 12.30,” responded Macdonald. “At first I argued that he was just knocked out, and trussed and gagged later. Then, as I developed the theory, some sort of drugging seemed indicated – and such was the fact, as I have learnt subsequently. However, to keep to the chain of events. Richard got Paul up to the playroom, left him unconscious there, and returned to Basil’s room, donned Basil’s pyjamas, and played his part to the maid, establishing that Basil was still in the house at 10.0 o’clock. Veronica and Martin had both gone out by this time, and Richard felt quite safe. If the maid saw him about she would take him for Basil. Now as to the actual mechanics of the shooting. Richard knew that it is possible to fix the time of death within fairly short limits if the body be examined shortly after death. He also knew that post mortem injuries can be detected from those inflicted previous to death. That is to say, he had to kill Paul at the time the shot was heard. Of

course, he didn't know that you would turn up when you did, but he probably welcomed you as a valuable witness. I reconstructed the events this way. All that Richard has to do to get ingress and egress from the playroom while the door was locked on the inside was to get a rope over the parapet of the balustrade. This applied to Martin also, of course, but Richard had the advantage of physique, a climber's training, and familiarity with ropes. Now it isn't easy to get a rope over that balustrade between the pillars, and make the rope hang down again so that the ends can be gathered in at the window below. As you know, the roof was barred to him. Richard wouldn't open the trapdoor leading to the roof because he wanted to leave the indisputable evidence of the cobwebs that the trap had not been opened. Now you have been over this house. Given the problem of insinuating a rope between the pillars of the balustrade and getting that rope over the top moulding and down again, how would you have done it?"

"A grapnel?"

"No good. The stone moulding wasn't strong enough to hold a man's weight on a grapnel. It would probably have broken, and it would certainly have left marks."

Long spread out his hands. "I just don't know," he replied. "That part of it beat me. I didn't even think of the balustrade."

"Well, I argued that it could be done with the salmon rod I found in Martin's bedroom," went on Macdonald. "A double line could be fastened to the tip of the rod, leaving one long end of the line free, and the other fastened to the reel. The tip of the rod is flexible, and fully extended it would reach up to the balustrade from the playroom window. Richard poked the tip of the rod between the pillars and shoved it up till it was clear of the parapet moulding. The free end of his line, if flagged and slightly weighted, would have blown out clear of the parapet, because the wind was blowing from the west. He then ran out the line on his reel – the weight would have brought it down – until he could catch in the slack at his bedroom window. He then lowered the rod, having got a line over the balustrade. It was easy after that to hitch a rope to the line and get the rope drawn over the parapet and knotted below. Once that rope was in position Richard was independent of doors and staircases. He could climb – and I assure you it takes very few seconds to slide down that

rope from one storey to the next.”

Long nodded. “Yes. I see. Neat. Oh, damned neat!”

“Yes. Damned neat. I found the rod and I saw its possibilities – but the rod was Martin’s. It was in Martin’s room. It might so easily have been Martin – or Veronica. However, to get on. Richard re-entered the house about 12.25 on the Wednesday morning just in time to see Higgins go off for his lunch. That was important, because Higgins was the one person likely to be in the garden at the east end of the house, and to see the climbing episode. Richard went up to his room, swarmed up the rope he had previously fixed in position, and got into the playroom by the window; he removed any odds and ends of evidence which it was necessary to remove, and pulled the string attached to the trigger. Paul was in that chair, unconscious, dressed in Basil’s clothes. The muzzle of the gun was beneath his chin: the string attached to the trigger over his toe – only Richard jerked the string. He then got out of the window, slid down the rope – a matter of seconds – got back in his own window, cut his rope and hauled it in, and was outside on the first floor landing before the maid had picked herself up after her tumble. Neat, as you said.”

Long went to the casement window and craned his neck out of it, looking up at the line of the balustrade above.

“I should never have thought of the salmon rod dodge,” he said, “though I was a fool not to have thought about a rope – only the fact that the trap door was locked, and that there was no ladder about the place long enough to reach that window put me off completely.”

Macdonald went on: “Well, there was the method – a possible one. Next, as to the perpetrator. As you realised immediately, if Basil could only get out of England on Paul’s passport, leaving Paul dead in such a manner that the corpse would be identified as Basil’s, then Basil would be in clover, complete with his loot – but Basil needed help for that plan to succeed... Richard, who had spent a lifetime abroad, was the very man to help him – with the promise of a fifty-fifty share in Basil’s stolen funds. Also, on Paul’s death, it was probable that Richard would share in Paul’s estate. It was Richard who arranged where Basil was to go when he reached Tunis: it was Richard and his friends who arranged that a corpse should be found by the authorities, and that the corpse should be labelled Paul Mallowood. In fact it was Richard who organised the

whole show. His was the brain which thought out all the details, including the careful fingerprint evidence, and the ingenious method of fabricating the suicide.”

Macdonald paused here, and then went on:

“The fingerprint evidence was very carefully thought out, on the assumption that though the police would accept the obvious suicide theory, yet careful routine investigations would be made. Richard tried to envisage every precaution which would be taken, and he was very thorough. With Paul unconscious and helpless, Richard got his fingerprints on to all the necessary places – the trigger and stock of the gun, from which other prints had been smudged away, the key of the door, the suicide letter, the notes (in Basil’s writing) left in the pockets of the corpse. The ebony brushes had already got the necessary fingerprints on them, because they were Paul’s own brushes – similar in appearance to Basil’s. In fact Richard envisaged all the investigations which would be made along that line. He banked on the suicide being accepted as a suicide, and provided evidence to reinforce that theory.”

“Clever devil!” said Long. “I wonder if Basil knew that the warrant for his arrest had actually been taken out. They cut it pretty fine from the point of view of time.”

“I’m quite sure that Basil did not know that the warrant would be in force so soon, nor Richard either,” replied Macdonald. “If they had done so, Richard would not have dared to wait till the last moment, as he did. If you had turned up half an hour earlier, the whole plot would have been blown sky-high. As it was, Richard probably congratulated himself on an incredible bit of luck. He had luck all along the line – in everything, save in, the fact that Martin realised that it was not Paul who had left in the Rolls Royce. Martin’s behaviour was the snag, because it left Richard guessing. He couldn’t be sure – and to make sure, he would have had to eliminate Martin. But to get back to my own part in the matter: I could see the possibilities: the difficulty was to get any evidence which could be regarded as proof. I wanted two things. One was to find Martin Mallowood. You remember the statement that Martin had leaned out of the window and waved good-bye to Paul in the Rolls Royce? It seemed to me quite probable that Martin had realised that it was not Paul who left, but Basil. If he realised that, Martin must have known at once that something had

happened to Paul. Now when Veronica battered on the playroom door after hearing the shot, she cried out Martin's name. My guess about those two was that each was afraid for the other. When Martin saw Basil drive off pretending to be Paul, his mind got a violent shock, and his reaction was 'Has Veronica killed Paul?' because there must be some extraordinary explanation to account for Basil being in Paul's place. Martin is a neurotic: any mental shock is liable to send him off his balance and cause fits of forgetfulness. Basil's appearance in that car was a shock to Martin – but he got a much worse shock when, having found the keys to the bedroom upstairs, he unlocked the dividing doors and saw what he thought was Paul's dead body inside. That sight almost unhinged him. He went out of the house like a sleep-walker, a victim to the amnesia which had often attacked him previously."

"But all the same, you couldn't be certain that Martin and Veronica were not in the plot?" asked Long.

"No. I've admitted that all through," replied Macdonald, "though there seemed to me several arguments against it. Martin, with his unstable mind and liability to the form of neurosis known as amnesia, would have been a dangerous accomplice in any elaborate plot such as was organised to dispose of Paul and to get Basil out of the country. When Veronica told me about Martin's queer wandering habits, I believed her. Something rang true. Similarly I believed in her devotion to Martin. When she called his name outside that locked door, she was genuinely terrified that he had shot himself, because she had seen him when she was out that morning, and had realised that his mental condition was abnormal. Of course she saw him when he crossed the lawn – when your man saw him – although she swore she hadn't. She tried to make an alibi for him – not very successfully. That poor effort at fabricating evidence did not seem to be consistent with the general measure of ability shown in the rest of the business – but still, I could not be certain. I believed in my own mind that Martin was innocent, but that he knew something essential, if I could only find him and get his evidence without driving him to extremes. A man in his state is very easily driven over the borderland of sanity. That conversation of his with Veronica, when he was struggling to remember what had really happened, was a most moving performance – a genuine effort of a half-deranged mind to get back to normality. When I heard it, I was glad that

neither I – nor Richard – had succeeded in penetrating to Martin’s hiding-place while his mind was still bemused.”

“And they got Basil in Tunis, after all?”

“Yes. Walsh got him. He was using the name Brownleigh, having succeeded in getting a passport under that name. He was so certain that his double identity would never be discovered. It’s curious to think of: if Basil Mallowood had paid for his own repairs to his car when that little Harford man bumped into him, we might never have discovered Alvarley, and Mr. Brownleigh might still be at liberty.”

“An expensive economy,” said Long. “What about Mrs. Brownleigh?”

“She was in the south of France, having already acquired another admirer – fortunately for her. Her affair with Basil Mallowood had run its course before this business started. She doesn’t come into the case – though it was through the medium of his association with her and his use of the name Brownleigh that Basil was finally run to earth – and once Basil was caught, Richard was calmly and cynically willing to admit the whole story. He challenged me to tell him how he’d done it, and I did, step by step. He admitted that the one point he was afraid of was Martin. He realised that Martin might have recognised Basil. Richard spent hours trying to get into those cellars – but the doors were always bolted on the inside.”

“He’s a fair-sized devil, but a clever devil,” said Long. “The amount he thought of in the way of forestalling evidence beats the band. One other point: that maid said she heard someone making a row up in the playroom when Richard was seen in the village.”

“She probably did hear a row, and a carefully manufactured one, at that. You can arrange for weights to fall to the ground at given times by suspending them from a nail with string, and leading a slow match to burn away the string. Richard had had two days and nights to arrange things in the playroom – and he arranged them carefully. I said that when he swarmed up his rope to pull the trigger, he also removed any other awkward evidence – including any bits and pieces from his noise producer. A careful practitioner was Richard.

“And now to boil the whole involved story into a straightforward statement,” said Macdonald. “Richard and Basil, who had been good friends in their youth, kept up a correspondence and occasionally met abroad unknown

to the rest of the family. When Basil realised that his defalcations must be discovered, he took counsel with Richard. Paul's retirement and foreign tour seemed to offer a good opportunity for the double coup – the killing of Paul and the safe escape of Basil with his final haul of looted funds. Basil learned from Mrs. Lorne both of Paul's retirement and his intention of spending a night at Wulfstane, and communicated these facts to Richard, who promptly came to England and to Wulfstane, and made arrangements for the coup. The problem was to get Basil away as Paul, to prove that Basil had been alive in the manor house after Paul's car had left, and to stage a suicide with the victim unidentifiable about the face. Richard thought out all the possibilities very carefully. He left no incongruities or loose ends, and the whole thing was most ingeniously thought out. Richard could not have foretold that Martin's neurotic behaviour would give first grounds for suspicion. As a matter of fact, if Martin had not disappeared, it's probable that you might have accepted the suicide at its face value – and once the suicide was accepted the plot would have been successful."

"Martin's disappearance was certainly the first thing which made me definitely suspicious," said Long, "and the rum part is that it was nothing to do with the case really."

"Oh, yes, it was," replied Macdonald. "Martin tended to have these wandering fits if his nerves were upset by some untoward happening. I kept on asking myself what it was that Martin had seen, since it seemed improbable that he had witnessed the shooting. Richard seemed pre-eminently the one for the climbing and the shooting. Then, when I studied the evidence and saw that Martin had waved good-bye to the pseudo Paul, it occurred to me that Martin had realised that it was not Paul who had left Wulfstane."

"That being so, didn't you think it probable Richard would try to kill Martin, too?"

"I thought he might – but I also was certain, once I had talked to Veronica, that Martin was alive. Veronica's very calmness indicated that. She knew Martin was safe. All she wanted was for you and me and Richard and everyone else to clear out, and leave her in peace, with Martin."

"Well, you read her aright, and I didn't," said Long. "Another point which I worried at was about Mrs. Lorne. Basil was said to have been sweet on her."

“Yes. I think he was in love with her, having tired of his Brownleigh lady,” said Macdonald. “If it hadn’t been for the King’s Proctor and his minions, I should have suspected that Mrs. Brownleigh and Mrs. Lorne were one and the same – but that point didn’t arise, thanks to the care of the divorce court section.”

Long sat and pondered, thinking deeply, and then went again to the window, saying:

“That notion of the line over the parapet – it was a hangman’s noose in the long run.”

Macdonald nodded. “Yes. Richard Mallowood went fishing for a fortune when he borrowed Martin’s salmon rod to get a line over the parapet. Like other practitioners in the craft of murder he forgot that ingenuity can be reconstructed by another mind when faced with the same problem. Richard was just a shade too clever, right up to the end, when he tried to announce that he was Paul come back again. He’s a clever actor and a clever mimic, but he over-reached himself.”

Long gave his own opinion on the matter.

“He reckoned on most contingencies, but not on you, Macdonald. It was your imagination which out-did his.”

“Imagination needs reinforcing by evidence,” said Macdonald, “and the evidence is always there, if one can only see it.”

THE END